

THE
NINOZINE
A MIRACULOUS FAN
PROJECT



I wish to take a moment to sincerely thank all of the contributors who made this Zine a reality. When it started I wasn't sure if anyone would be interested at all, but was immediately *completely* overwhelmed with creators reaching out to take part. People were eager to take a moment of their time and talent to make something special in honor of a truly fantastic character, and the enthusiasm behind these works is what kept this train going for these past three months. This community has seen some remarkable creators, and the fine folks who answered the call for this project are no exception.

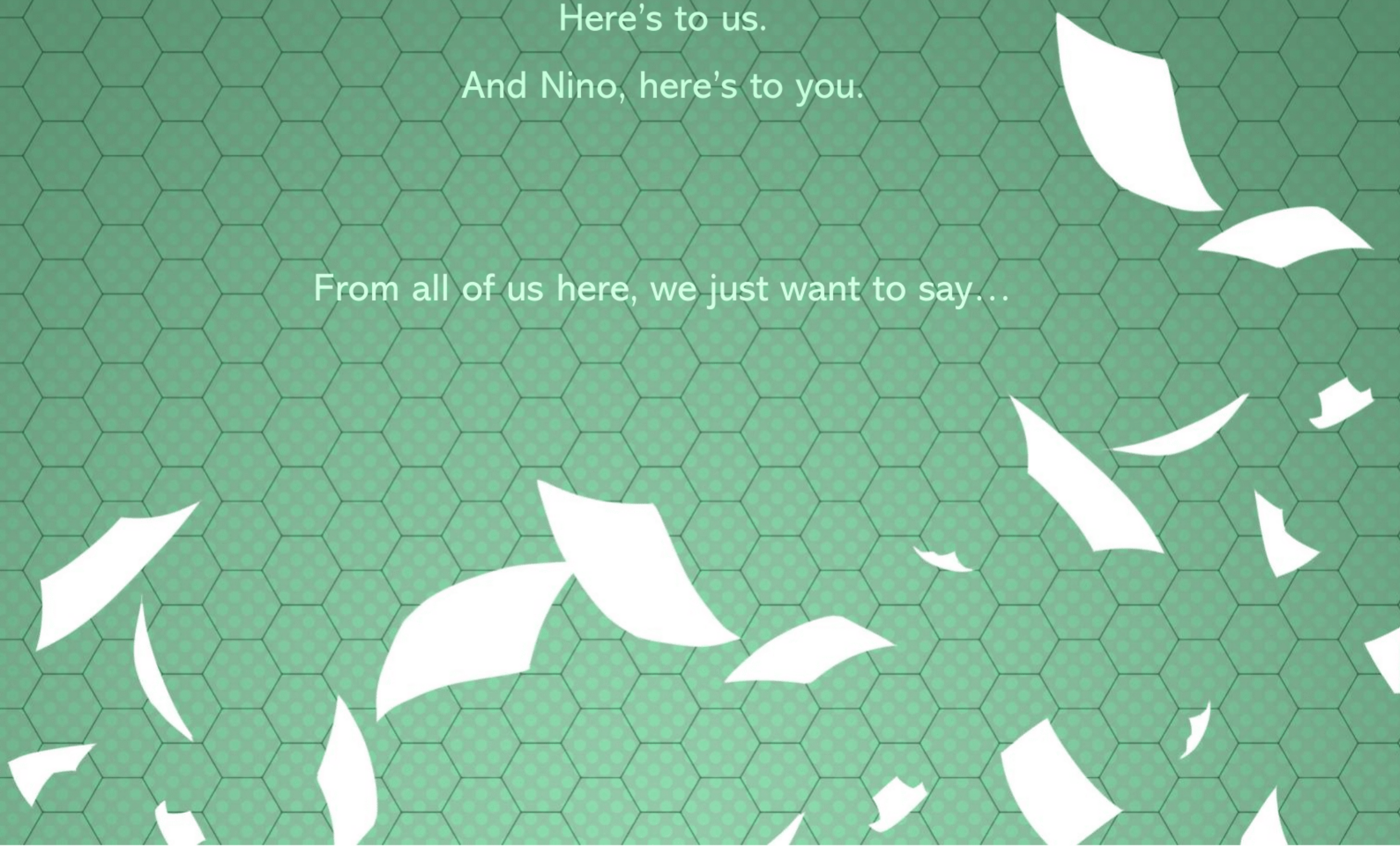
Nino Lahiffe is a character that many people relate to, with his fumbling earnestness, humor, and enthusiasm pouring out and defining him. His loyalty, openness, and good spirit make him one of the most memorable characters in Miraculous in our minds, and yet we feel his lovely soul often goes underappreciated.

So here's to us! To the folks who made this, and the people that read it. Here's to the people who love this kid, whether it be because we can see ourselves in him or wish to encounter someone like him. To the people who he means a whole awful lot to, and those who wish to see his goofy cap pop up on screen as much as we can have him.

Here's to us.

And Nino, here's to you.

From all of us here, we just want to say...





thank you

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History Repeats

-SeasonoftheGeek-

Discovering and supporting the fact that his teenage son was a superhero just like he'd been years before required a fine balance of being proud and terrified, but Nino thought he was handling it well for the most part. For example, he was currently only trying to hide every other wince and flinch as he watched Jude, or rather Luckbug, crash into the higher beams of the Eiffel Tower from his vantage point on the observation deck.

"Maybe it's time to call it a night, little dude," he called. "You should give the nuts and bolts a rest. I think there's been enough structural damage for one night."

Luckbug dropped down to the deck with a grunt. "I'm not getting any better."

"But you're not getting any worse."

"Gee, thanks, Dad. I'm so glad I asked you to come out here with me instead of Mom."

Nino couldn't help but grin as Jude dropped his transformation and sank down on the bench beside him. "If you think your mother would go easier on you, you've been living in a different house than me."

"I'm telling her you said that."

"I know who runs our house. She knows it and I know it." Nino leaned back and stared out over the city. "So what's really the problem?"

"I just suck," Jude muttered. "I should hand the earrings over to someone else."

"It didn't seem like you were having trouble a few months ago when you were sneaking out and fighting dark magical beings from hell. And wasn't it just a couple of weeks ago that there was a new segment showing you rocking in a hammock you'd made with your yoyo between the Arc de Triomphe?"

The teenager crossed his arms sullenly. "Yeah, well, I was a dumb kid and didn't know what I was getting into. I'm just not cut out for this."

Nino nodded sagely. "And this wouldn't have anything to do with what happened to your friends when you made the wrong call in that fight against the Dark One last week?"

Jude sank down lower. "I don't want to talk about that."

"Okay."

"And they're fine now. The Cure fixed everything."

"I know."

“But yeah, I made a bad call and they got hurt and even though everyone is okay now, it’s not like anyone forgot.”

Nino glanced over at him. “I thought you didn’t want to talk about it.”

Jude glared at his lap. “I don’t.”

The sounds of the city floated up to them from below and Nino let the silence between them simmer until he finally spoke. “I made a bad call once and got one of my teammates hurt. It was awful. I tried to give up my Miraculous that night.”

Interest flashed on Jude’s face and Nino knew he’d hooked him. He and Alya decided together to try to keep their hero stories to a minimum once the truth was out between all three of them but this seemed like a good time to take one out, brush it off, and give it a new audience.

“So what happened?”

A memory of Chat Noir bloodied on the floor of Hawk Moth’s lair flashed in Nino’s mind and he frowned. “Well, you’re going to need a little backstory before I get to the main event. How much have you learned about Hawk Moth?”

“Enough, I think. I know he was Uncle Adrien’s dad and you guys fought him. He had the Miraculous Everly uses now to create champions to help us when we need them.”

Nino nodded and took a moment to decide if he was going to keep going. It wasn’t his secret to share exactly but...

“What you probably don’t know is that Gabriel-- Hawk Moth,” he quickly amended, “is also Chat Noir’s dad.” He watched his son’s brow furrow in confusion and then he was looking at him with widening eyes.

“Wait, Uncle Adrien was Chat Noir?”

“Yep.”

“And his dad was the bad guy?”

“Yep.”

Jude frowned. “So that would be like me fighting you.”

“If I was an egotistical tyrant, sure,” Nino shrugged, trying not to let it show how much the thought of them being pitted against each other bothered him. “Gabriel is not a good man. He never has been as far as I can tell but I’m on the outside looking in.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means that Adrien still has trouble talking about him and everything that happened because he still can’t see his father as just a villain like we all did. He was still his father.”

"Is that why he got hurt?" Jude prompted.

For a moment, Nino had forgotten what took them on this path of conversation and he had to regather his thoughts. It'd been over a decade and closer to two now, but it was still uncomfortable to recall. They'd all been so young...like his son was now.

He took in a deep breath. "Ladybug had a bad feeling about Chat Noir missing a meeting and a patrol and didn't know how to get in contact with him, but she knew I did. Adrien and I found out about each other early on. At that time, only Ladybug's identity was a secret from the rest of us and to her, the only secret identity was Chat's." He saw Jude trying to keep up and decided to cut the rest of the identity reveal gymnastics out of the story for the most part.

"I tried to get in contact with Adrien out of the mask first," he continued. "I even went to his house but no one would let me in. I transformed and tried to get in his room but the house was shut up tight. Adrien always left his window unlocked for any of us to get in or him to get out so that was the first tip off that something was wrong."

Nino shook his head. "The thing about being a hero...the thing about life in general, really, is that when you get to look back, it's much clearer what the better decision was to make, but when you're right in the middle of it, you don't always know the right thing to do. Does that make sense?"

"That's how I feel about last week," Jude replied quietly. "Now that I've been able to think about it, I know I made a bad call but I really did think I was doing the best thing at the time. But I'm supposed to be the team leader. I can't make bad calls and realize later that I should've done something different!" His voice rose with every word and then he stood and paced in front of the bench. "Camille was almost killed because I got cocky and thought I could take out the Dark One on my own."

"Juju, come sit back down." Nino patted the space beside him. His son let out a frustrated growl and threw himself back down to the bench with a huff. "You're so much like your mom."

"Dad."

"Right. Back to my story." Nino tried to smile but it felt too small on his face, too forced. "I found a way into the house through the roof and that's when I found Gabriel. He was talking to Chat Noir, pleading with him, and I knew he knew about Adrien." The memory resurfaced in hazy detail and he could almost feel the sickening flutter of butterfly wings against his skin. "I caught them both off guard and Gabriel transformed and immediately tried to take me out. I didn't realize he'd akumatized his assistant and driver to keep guard in the house and they came after me too."

Jude was sitting straighter now, investment in the story plain on his face. "What happened?"

"Chat and I fought them." He was surprised to feel the lump forming in his throat; it'd all been so long ago. "Hawk Moth was determined to kill me, I think. He was at the end of his rope. The akumas kept Chat busy while he and I fought and he got in a few good blows." Nino lifted his chin and traced the thin scar along his jaw left from the rapier from Hawk Moth's cane. "I really did think I was going to die that day. I remember looking over and seeing Chat running towards us and thinking I should've told the others, I should've waited for more help. We were going to lose our Miraculous, maybe even die, and it was my fault"

"Yeah, but Ladybug is the one who sent you to go find him," Jude argued. "It's her fault you were there in the first place."

"She was doing what she thought was best in sending me. As soon as I found Chat, I could've called for backup but I didn't because I thought I could help on my own. We all made our decisions."

"Still, she was the team leader and...and..." The younger man trailed off helplessly. "It falls back on her."

Nino considered that and decided to take a different approach. "Did you know that I was offered the position to become Guardian of the Miraculous?"

Jude's attention sharpened once more as he looked at his father. "Kagami is the Guardian."

"And she's a good one; I'm the one who endorsed her for the position. She's an excellent judge of character, though we've had a few words since I found out about you."

"So if you'd been in charge, I wouldn't have my Miraculous. Is that what you're saying?" Jude was falling back into sullenness.

At the beginning of the conversation, he'd wanted to give back the earrings and now he was mad at the thought of not having them. Nino had to resist the temptation to roll his eyes. Being the adult was tedious at times.

"I passed on the responsibility because your mom and I were going to have you and we wanted to keep you safe. We gave up Wayzz and Trixx for our family because it was the right call to make and looking back, I don't regret it."

"Good to know I'm not a regret."

"You're not listening, Jude."

His son crossed his arms and Nino sighed. "What I'm trying to say is that you never know if you're making the right decision in the moment. You have to take the information you have and make a call and sometimes it works out and sometimes it doesn't, but that doesn't mean you give up." His words hung in the air between them and Nino spotted Tikki peeking out from Jude's jacket to give him a fond look.

"So you're really just saying to try my best." Jude smirked at his father. "How very after school special of you, Dad."

"For a sweet kid, you're such a little punk sometimes."

"And who do you think I get that from, dude?"

...that was hilarious, dude.

Alright, gotta go!

Love you too bro,
see you soon.





Phil
7/2019

Operation: Rapunzel

-Anthemyst-

On a warm Saturday morning, Nino Lahiffe gathered every member of his class together, save one. Miss Bustier had granted him use of their classroom for the day, and had thankfully not asked any follow-up questions after Nino's vague story about a collaborative art project. A few of his classmates had grumbled about sacrificing half a weekend, but well-placed glares from Alya had set everyone straight, and now they were all seated and waiting for Nino to explain just what was going on.

"I want to thank everyone for coming here today," Nino began, addressing them all from Miss Bustier's usual spot in front of the blackboard. "As Adrien's best friend, I've brought you all here to-"

"Excuse me," Chloe interrupted, raising her hand but not waiting to be called on, "but I'm Adrikins' best friend."

Nino sighed. "Fine. Whatever. As Adrien's best male friend?" Chloe gave him a begrudging nod. "Thank you. As Adrien's best male friend, I've brought you all here to-"

"Is this going to take long?" Alix interrupted. Everyone else had taken their usual seats, but Alix had grabbed Miss Bustier's chair in the front and was pushing herself around in circles. "It's Saturday, and I have canals to tag."

"Yes," Nino said. "Yes, it will take long. And it'll take longer if I get interrupted every five seconds. Now, as you all know, it's my man Adrien's birthday next week, and it's recently come to my attention that he's never been allowed to go to an amusement park. Disneyland Paris offers half-rates for birthdays, so I'm thinking-" Ivan raised his hand and waited politely. "Ivan, this isn't an actual class, you don't have to-actually, you know what, that's a good idea, everyone raise their hands for the rest of the meeting. Ivan?"

"Why's his dad letting him go this year, if Adrien's never been allowed before?"

"Good question, thank you for asking. He isn't. That's where everyone in this room comes in." Nino took a moment to adjust his glasses and pause for dramatic effect. "Ladies. Gentlemen. Allow me to welcome you to... Operation: Rapunzel!" Everyone stared at Nino blankly. He coughed. "Babe, that's your cue," he muttered.

"What? Oh, right!" Alya pressed a key on her laptop, and the classroom's overhead projector flicked on. 'OPERATION: RAPUNZEL' displayed across the screen behind Nino.

"Rapunzel?" Nathaniel repeated.

"That's Adrien's codename for the heist," Nino explained.

"Why?"

"He's blonde, the closest thing to royalty in modern Paris, and not allowed to leave his house," Max said. "It's very apt. Arguably too apt, given the purpose of codenames is to disguise one's true identity, but I digress."

"Right. Thank you, Max. Now, I've got a rough plan laid out already but you guys are here to bring your skills and ideas to the table, so-"

"I have an idea," Rose said. "What if we just...you know...ask nicely?" Everyone turned to look at her. "I mean, okay, Adrien's dad is a bit...much... but, um, surely he wants Adrien to have a good birthday?"

"Yeah, I tried that last year," Nino said, annoyed. "And if push comes to shove, so help me God I will get akumatized again to make sure Adrien gets the birthday he deserves, but I would *prefer* to avoid that, so. If I could continue?" Nino paused, but nobody said anything. "Good. Thank you. Next slide, please." Alya tapped a key, and a detailed schedule came up. "This is Adrien's itinerary for the day, obtained for us courtesy of Marinette."

Marinette turned bright red as the class looked at her in unison. "It's not weird, I know everybody's schedule, I'm the class representative, it's my job!"

"Is it, though?" Alix asked.

"First up, modeling," Nino said, pointing. "Adrien has an extended photo shoot from nine to twelve. We will intercept Adrien the moment he gets dropped off by his bodyguard, and replace him with another model. I'm thinking..." Nino scanned the room. "Uh. Kim?"

"Oh my god, no," Chloe said, rolling her eyes.

"Why not?" Max asked. "He's objectively the most physically attractive member of the heist." Kim blushed.

"One, rude. Two, has he ever modeled before? Yeah, I didn't think so."

"How hard can modeling be?" Alix asked. "Anyone can do it. I'll do it."

"Chloe, you've modeled before?" Alya asked.

"Obviously," Chloe said. "I've even modeled for the Gabriel brand before. Daddy has me do a few shoots whenever he wants Agreste to raise his annual campaign contribution."

There was a moment of silence as this sunk in.

"Wow," Nino said. "Okay. Um. We can, uh, we can unpack that later. Anyway, sure, Chloe can be the substitute model. Now, the director is gonna call Adrien's dad's assistant to confirm the last minute switch, so at 8:55 two of us will show up at the Agreste manor claiming to need Adrien's piece of a class project. While there, they will steal Nathalie Sancoeur's cell phone, answer the confirmation call, and slip it back into her pocket before she can notice it's missing. Who here would be best at stealing a phone?"

"Marinette," every girl in the class said in unison. Marinette's face went red once more and she sunk a few inches into her seat.

Nino blinked. "Uh huh. Right. Great. And, uh, who can do the best Nathalie impression?" There were a few seconds of silence, and then Max raised his hand. "Oh, I was thinking one of the girls actually might-"

"Markov can imitate human speech with 97.8% accuracy," Max interrupted. "He just needs five minutes of sample speech from the person being imitated."

"Wow. Cool. Okay, great. So that brings us to noon." Nino pointed back at the schedule. "From noon to two, Adrien has fencing practice. A decoy Adrien will be waiting to be picked up by Adrien's bodyguard, dressed in full fencing gear including the mask so as to disguise their identity. Who here wants to fence for two hours?"

"Ooh, me," Kim said immediately. "Dibs. Dibs on fencing."

"Great. Thank you. Two to four he's scheduled to... yes, Mylene?"

"What are everyone else's codenames?" Mylene asked.

"Huh?"

"Well, Adrien's 'Rapunzel', but what's everyone else? Everyone else needs a codename."

"She's right, babe," Alya said. "Everyone has to have a codename or it's not a real heist."

Nino let out a heavy sigh. "Right. Okay. Fine. Um. I guess I'm Flynn, and Alya-"

"No way, that won't work," Alix interrupted. "You established a pattern. If Adrien's Rapunzel, all the other boys have to be princesses, too." The other girls in the class all nodded in agreement.

"What?"

"Dibs on Mulan," Kim said quickly.

"That seems a bit racist," Max said.

"It's not racist if I say it," Kim argued. "Anyway, she's the best princess. She's a princess, right?"

"I'm not sure. I've always been partial to Belle myself, actually," Max admitted.

"Nino should be Aurora, since his plan is putting us all to sleep," Chloe said.

"As long as Gabriel's still Mother Gothel, I don't care what anybody else's name is," Nino said.

"Fine, I'll do it, everybody shut up," Alya said. She began pointing at everyone in the room one by one, starting with herself. "Flynn, Aurora, Aladdin, Eric, Hans, Kristoff, Jasmine, Adam, Philip, Charming, Moana, Mulan, Belle. You're welcome, everyone."

"Stealing my codename?" Nino said. "That's cold, babe." Alya grinned at him.

"Hans is the bad guy!" Chloe protested. "And why does Marinette get to be the only prince that got his own movie?"

"She's the professional thief for the heist, obviously she's Aladdin."

"I want my codename to be Queen Bee."

Nino rolled his eyes. "Everyone knows you're Queen Bee, Chloe, that can't be your codename."

"Speaking of Queen Bee," Chloe said, "I think we should bring Ladybug in on this heist. She's my best friend, I'm sure she'll help."

"I thought Adrien was your best friend?" Nino asked dryly.

"I am *Adrien's* best friend, but Ladybug is *my* best friend." Next to her, Sabrina made a small noise of indignation. "And Sabrina, obviously, obviously Sabrina is also my best friend. I can have two best friends. Anyway. I'll just ask Ladybug to kidnap Adrien for us, it'll be way easier than all this."

Alya rolled her eyes. "Chloe, Ladybug is a superhero, she's not going to *kidnap* anybody."

"She might," Marinette mumbled. "I-I mean-for a good cause, like this, maybe, it wouldn't hurt to *ask*."

"She won't, trust me," Alya said.

"Agreed," Nino said. "Ladybug is way too honorable." Alya and Nino exchanged a look that fortunately no one in the class was able to interpret, and then Nino turned back to the display. "Okay, for this next phase of the plan we need to distract the local paparazzi. Juleka, I was thinking if you could get your family to relocate their usual practice jam session to this part of the Seine, we could..."

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Three hours later, the plan to sneak Adrien to and from Disneyland Paris was more or less solidified. Everyone had at least one role to play, and it was definitely the most complicated heist Nino had ever been a party to, but more than one classmate had valuable suggestions and Nino was confident they'd succeed. Nino thanked every member of their class as they left, and soon it was only him, Alya and Marinette.

"You can go on ahead, girl," Alya told Marinette, "I'm just helping my boy pack up and then-"

"I wanted to talk to Nino, actually," Marinette said.

"Really?" Nino turned to her. "What's on your mind?"

Marinette bit her lip. "You probably know Adrien better than I do," she said, "but, I mean, do you think this is what Adrien really wants for his birthday? I know Adrien and birthdays is sensitive for you-"

"Not just me," Nino said defensively. "I was akumatized, sure, but Alya told me what happened last year with your gift. That must have really sucked." Marinette nodded. "How could you let Gabriel take the credit for something you worked so hard on?"

"Because it made Adrien so happy," Marinette said softly. "It wasn't about me getting credit for anything, it was about making Adrien happy. And sneaking around behind his father's back, that doesn't actually make Adrien happy, does it? Not the way getting the love and attention he deserves from his father makes him happy."

Nino was quiet for a while, then he sighed. "His dad is such a *dick*, Mari."

Marinette smiled. "I know."

"She's got a point," Alya said, handing over Nino's packed up slides. "Adrien would be a lot happier if the trip to Disneyland actually came from his father. And if you could come up with all this, babe, I'm sure you can come up with a way to convince Gabriel to let Adrien go."

Nino looked at Alya and Marinette, then sighed. "I'll call Nathalie."

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"...absolutely no junk food, no rides over eighty kilometers an hour, no getting wet, and under no circumstances are you to allow any of the peons working there to take your picture, is that understood?"

Adrien grinned up at his father. "Perfectly, sir," he said, beaming from ear to ear.

Gabriel Agreste sighed begrudgingly. "Well. Alright then. If you're absolutely certain this is how you wish to spend your birthday-"

"It is, thank you Father-"

"-then I suppose you can't get yourself into *too* much trouble with your bodyguard and," Gabriel gave Nino, Alya and Marinette a quick look up and down, "*friends* with you. I expect you to be back in time for dinner."

"You could come too, Sir," Nino said, making his eyes go as wide and innocent as he possibly could. Alya kicked him.

Gabriel didn't quite repress a shudder. "Thank you, no. I'm sure Adrien will have more fun without his father present."

"You'll be here for dinner though, right?"

"Of course. Go on, don't keep your driver waiting." Gabriel didn't even wait for them to leave his office before returning his attention to his work.

"I can't believe he's letting me go," Adrien said happily as they left the mansion. "Nino? Everything okay?"

"He's fine," Alya said, "he's just bummed we didn't have to go with Plan B."

"Plan B?"

"Oh, it was a thing of beauty, Adrien," Nino said mournfully. "Secret identities, baits and switches, at least three costume changes. You would have loved it."

Adrien laughed, then threw an arm around Nino. "You'll have to tell me all about it on the drive over. You're the best friend anyone could ask for, you know that?"

Nino grinned. "Happy Birthday, dude."





Chit-Chat

-ThatGirlOnStage-

The nightly visits were becoming habitual.

Nino was carefully not saying anything about it, because, for all that Chat Noir was charming and excitable and playfully flirtatious, there was something skittish buried under it all, and Nino was petrified of spooking him. He'd done it twice already. Hardly a week after the superheroes had first appeared, up late doing homework, Nino had spied Chat sitting on the roof across the street. He'd opened the window to call out to him, but as soon as Chat had seen him, he launched himself away before Nino could blink.

It was months later when Nino had heard a tap on his window for the first time and turned to see a pair of glowing green eyes outside. He'd shrieked loud enough to wake the dead before he realized who it was. Then, thankful his parents were out and his brother at a sleepover, he'd slid the window up to find Chat balancing on his staff, entirely too big a grin on his face for the heart attack he'd nearly given Nino.

"Hey," Chat said. "Nino, right? You were the Bubbler." Nino's cheeks went hot. Not the most flattering way to be remembered.

"That's me, yeah." Chat's grin didn't waver.

"You like music, right? I remember you DJ'ing that kid's birthday party." Nino relaxed slightly.

"Yeah, mec! I have my first real gig lined up next month. Well, I mean, it's a charity thing through my school, but still."

"Did you hear about the music festival they're hosting at the Jardin des Tuileries?"

"Yeah, but I couldn't get tickets," Nino said miserably. Chat's grin grew somehow even wider, his eyes luminescent in the dim evening, catching the orange glow of the streetlamps below him. He rocked forward on the staff, leaning in toward Nino.

"Do you want to go?" he asked conspiratorially. Nino gaped.

"Wi- I- How?" Chat laughed.

"We just have to find a high enough perch."

"And— how come you're inviting *me*?" Nino asked. Chat shrugged.

"It wouldn't be as fun without company," he said. He held out a hand. "So, you coming?" Nino crawled up on his window ledge before he finished the sentence.

"Are you kidding? Let's *go*."

It was one of the most surreal evenings Nino had ever had. If it weren't for how *specifically* he could remember everything – the rub of Chat's gloved hand against his own, the cloying smell of alcohol drifting up to them as they balanced on a lighting strut, the ringing in his ears the next day – he would have been convinced he dreamed it. Until Chat showed up again a month later inviting him to a Jagged Stone concert.

It was erratic at first – sometimes he'd turn up three days in a row, and sometimes not for months – but the longer it went on, the more frequent it became, until now, Nino could almost count on him showing up about once a week. They'd expanded beyond music concerts – they went out for late night crêpes, or went to see movies, or stopped at clubs where Nino introduced himself to DJs while Chat took selfies with fans. But a lot of the time now they just— talked. Sometimes Chat would take Nino across the city, someplace like Sacre-Cœur, with a stunning view of Paris sprawling beneath them, but sometimes he simply climbed through the window into Nino's room with little warning and less ceremony and sprawled himself across Nino's floor, flipping idly through his textbooks. And they talked. About nothing in particular, most of the time, because Nino was being careful.

It was during one of those talks that Nino had scared him off again. He still wasn't entirely sure what he'd said – he'd been talking idly about school, complaining about homework while Chat made noises of sympathy and agreement, his eyes skimming over Nino's hellish chemistry assignment, he'd

said something about Marinette and Alya and him planning to go check out this new café place at the end of the week, and Adrien if he could, but they could never count on Adrien being allowed to go—

Chat had sat up, all of a sudden, and left with hardly a goodbye, even though he'd only been there for about twenty minutes. And it wasn't an akuma, because Nino had checked the news after. He didn't know what he'd said. Chat hadn't seemed mad; he'd been back three weeks later, but there had been something so suddenly wary and *sad* in his eyes when he'd mumbled some incoherent excuse to leave, and it had been so unlike Chat that Nino didn't even know how to ask him if he was alright. By the time he came back, it seemed too late, and he was too worried about scaring him off again. Because he was getting used to these increasingly habitual night visits, and he didn't particularly want them to stop.

Chat was lying on his floor at the moment, a novel draped over his face, slipping in and out of dozing, occasionally lifting the book up enough to peer at a few lines. Nino, for his part, had been trying and failing to think about geometry for about an hour now, his eyes drifting constantly to Chat.

He was being careful. He was trying *so hard* to be careful. But he didn't think he could be careful forever. He discarded his pencil, pushing the textbook away from him. He rolled his desk chair out next to Chat, lifting the book off his face. Chat squinted up at him.

"Hey, mec, can I ask you something?"

Chat shrugged against the floor. "Shoot."

"How come—" He hesitated. "Why do you hang out with me?" Chat frowned.

"I like hanging out with you," he said. "Do you—?"

"No I— like hanging out with you too," Nino said hastily. "But— you could probably be hanging out with just about anyone in Paris. Why'd you come knock on my window, of all people?" Chat sat up, running a nervous finger unconsciously over his ring.

"It's... I... Um. I... talked to Adrien Agreste after the... Bubbler thing. And— look, do you know how many people get akumatized for selfish reasons? I mean a lot of the time it's because someone's been awful to them, but so many of the akumas are angry because something they wanted or something they were trying to do got spoiled." He looked down, into the corner. "Adrien told me all you wanted was for him to have a birthday party."

"His dad's an asshole," Nino muttered. Chat's shoulders tightened.

"There haven't been a lot of akumas that have just wanted to do something nice for a friend," he finished. He climbed to his feet. "Look, maybe I should go—"

"Wait," Nino reached out and caught his wrist. "It's just— I'm kind of getting used to having you swing by, and I... I wanted to understand why." Chat paused, eyes still cast out the window, his arm tense in Nino's grip. After a moment, he shrugged.

"I guess I'm lonely," he said. "G'night, Nino." He was gone before Nino got a chance to stop him.

He was fidgety in school the next day, pencil spinning in his fingers, itching for the refuge of his headphones. There was a chaotic logic to music that always managed to hold his attention, the mathematics of chords and intervals an ever-shifting challenge that would help him forget his anxieties about a frustratingly enigmatic cat. Adrien was side-eyeing him, watching him get down less than half the lecture notes with increasing concern. At the end of class, when Nino managed to completely miss the homework assignment, Adrien silently slid his notebook over so Nino could copy it down.

"Everything okay?" he asked as the rest of the class packed up their bags. Nino gave a noncommittal shrug.

"I'm worried I might have screwed something up with a friend," he said. Adrien blinked in surprise.

"Who?" he asked.

"Oh, uh, no one you know," Nino said evasively. "Someone from— outside school. It's just— he's a really, uh, private person, and I'm not sure if I ever know what he's thinking, and last— yesterday I think I might've made him mad, but I'm not sure, and I don't..." He trailed off in frustration. Adrien's forehead furrowed as he slipped his notebook back into his bag.

"Why do you think you made him mad?" Nino shook his head.

"I'm not even sure I *did*," he said. "But he left really abruptly and... I dunno, mec. I really like this guy but I'm not sure why he even hangs out with me." Adrien smiled and bumped his shoulder.

"It's not like you to be nervous about this stuff," he said. "I'm sure he's not mad. Maybe he's just... shy." Nino rubbed his eyes behind his glasses, images of Chat Noir posing for photographs like he was born for the paparazzi flashing behind his eyelids.

"I don't think he's shy," he muttered. Adrien slid out from behind the desk, tossing his bag over his shoulder.

"Nino," he said. "You're one of the nicest people I've ever met. You could probably make friends with anyone you wanted to."

"Between the two of us, you're the one who somehow manages to stand Chloe," he replied flatly. Adrien laughed.

"C'mon," he said. "Let's grab lunch, I'm starving."

Nino was afraid Chat might not come back again anytime soon, that he had spooked him again. But there he was at his window again that night, eyes bright, Cheshire grin glowing. Nino let him in with a bigger sigh of relief than he wanted to admit. Chat tumbled through the window so fast he knocked Nino over. He rolled off him, laughing, one of his legs still thrown on top of Nino's shins. He threw his arms wide against the carpet and sighed contentedly.

"You're in a good mood tonight," Nino said, something unintentionally affectionate slipping into his voice as he did. He pushed up onto his elbows, looking down at Chat's face.

"It's just... good to see you," Chat said, smiling at the ceiling. He glanced over at Nino, smile fading slightly. "Hey, sorry if I was weird last night. It's just—"

"Mec, it's okay. Secret identity stuff, I get it, you can't talk about yourself too much." Chat rolled onto his side, pulling his leg free and sitting up. Nino suddenly missed the contact.

"It's not— okay, it is that, some of it, but— Look, I—" Chat looked down at his hands. "I don't have a lot of friends and I don't— know if I'm very good at it," he said. "I don't want to screw this up." Nino stared at him for a moment, and then burst out laughing. Chat looked startled. "What? What's funny?"

"That's what *I've* been doing," Nino said. He pushed all the way up to sitting. "I've been trying so hard to be careful because— I've never had a friend who's a superhero before, how am I supposed to know how this works? I didn't want to scare you away by asking personal questions, but I want to know you better, and— you're *Chat Noir*, how were *you* going to screw this up?" Chat looked almost offended.

"Nino, you're the— you're one of the coolest guys I know. You're an incredible DJ and you're so kind and easy to be around and—" He stopped, taking a deep breath. "How were *you* going to screw this up? I can't even tell you my real name." Nino managed a smile.

"I guess we've muddled along well enough until now," he said. Chat absentmindedly drew whirls through Nino's carpet with one claw.

"I *want* to tell you who I am," he said, and Nino felt all the air leave his body for a moment. "But— Well, Ladybug might kill me if I did, but also— she has a point, it's too dangerous while Hawk Moth is still out there." The air came rushing back and Nino deflated slightly, somehow both relieved and disappointed. "But, I promise, when it *is* safe, you'll be one of the first people to know. Is it okay if we keep... muddling, until then?" Nino smiled.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I think I'm alright with that."

A HERO



CARAPACE

THIS AUGUST



C'est Magnifique être Sympathique

-Peregrer-

9 July

It was a sunny Tuesday afternoon the first time Alya entered the Sip'N'Spin. Her first impression was that the name was terribly corny, even for a record store combined with a coffee shop. Couches sat up against the walls, alternating with shelves and racks full of new and used records. Small tables in front of the seating provided patrons with a place to set their coffee cups. At the back end of the surprising long and narrow store was the counter, where an attractive young barista was taking orders from a family of (Alya assumed) tourists. She approached slowly, managing to overhear the tail-end of their conversation.

The barista chatted with the customers as he dispensed fresh-brewed coffee into three to-go cups. "Well, I hope you all enjoy your time in town. Definitely check out the pie shop around the corner if you're into that. You will *not* regret it." He ducked below the counter to pull a jug of cream out and topped off one of the orders with a flourish. "Here you go!"

As the tourists collected their cups and moved off to the side, Alya stepped. The barista turned to her with a wide smile on his face. "Hey, what can I get for you today?"

Alya contemplated the menu scrawled in chalk on a blackboard mounted high on the back wall. Lots of interesting options, but there would be time enough to try them all out. "I'll get an iced chai latte, light on the ice."

"Sure thing!" He punched the order in and started fixing her latte while Alya swiped her card. As he assembled the drink, she took the opportunity to really observe him. He was tall, maybe six feet, and lanky. His close-cropped hair peeked out under the edges of his baseball cap, little tufts of fringe pressed flat against his forehead. He wore a denim apron over his black uniform, a color combination that complimented his bronze skin. A rainbow of wristbands jostled around on his right arm as he moved about. "There you are." He met her eyes, just as Alya realized, perhaps a moment too late to hide it, that she was staring.

"Oh, thanks." Instead of finding a to-go lid and leaving like she'd planned, Alya took a seat at one of the stools by the counter. The shop was fairly empty, and the few other patrons there were occupied with laptops or records. She took a sip of her latte.

"How is it?"

"It's good." She smiled. "Definitely made the right choice."

"I'm glad. Is this your first time coming to the Sip'N'Spin?" He rinsed out several shot glasses with what Alya assumed was a small, high-pressure spigot under the counter as he spoke.

"Yup." She sipped her latte again, savoring the notes of cardamom and clove. "Not the last time though, for sure."

"I'm glad," he said again, with a grin that somehow assured Alya that he truly meant it.

On a whim, she stuck her hand out. "I'm Alya."

He shook her hand. His grip was firm, his fingers slightly callused. "Nino."

24 July

Marinette wiped down the counter, swaying slightly to the music playing over the speakers. Nino emerged from the back room to man the register. She bumped his hip with hers, nodding toward where the music was coming from. "One of your mixes?"

He nodded, grinning, before turning to greet a customer approaching the counter. Marinette kept cleaning, rinsing out glasses and organizing the stacks of to-go cups. When Nino started making the

customer's order, she caught his attention again. "It's good. Everything on this playlist has been really good."

"Thanks." He was already looking down as he dispensed freshly ground coffee into a single-serving filter basket and tamped it down, but he ducked his head lower, trying and failing to hide the blush spreading across his face. "I put a lot of time into it."

The bell on the door clanged softly, heralding the entrance of a young woman with thick auburn hair. Marinette noted with amused surprise that Nino's blush darkened when he noticed her.

"Hey! Alya, wasn't it?"

"Mhm. Nino?"

"That's me. What can I do for you today?" Nino rested his forearms on the counter and leaned forward. Marinette smirked, knowing he wouldn't notice. Nino was always friendly with the customers, especially the regulars, but this was *extra* friendly.

Alya ran her hand along her side of the counter before also leaning in slightly. "Welllll, let's start with a London Fog. It may be hot outside, but if I hang out here for long I'm likely to freeze."

Nino chuckled and started the tea brewing. "Yeah, we like to blast the AC."

"And great music," Marinette chimed in. She gestured slightly towards Nino with her head. "You know, he did the remix playing right now."

Nino's embarrassed "Mariiii" was drowned out by Alya's excited gasp. "Wait, that must be why I couldn't find the 'Sympathique' remix I heard here the other day. Did you do that one too?"

Nino nodded. He rubbed the back of his neck, a gesture Marinette figured he had picked up from Adrien. "Y-yeah. You liked it?"

"So good. As soon as I got home, I tried to find it on Spotify, but no luck. Makes sense though. You ever think about putting your mixes online?"

"Eh, I've put a few up. Trying to get some traction but it's been slow going."

Alya nodded slowly, before a wide smirk spread across her face. "I might be able to help you there. I majored in journalism and social-media marketing, and I'm trying to expand my portfolio. If you send me that 'Sympathique' remix, I might even do it for free." She winked.

"Really?"

"Of course. Here, this is my number. Text me." Alya tore a scrap of paper out of her notebook and scribbled down a number before sliding it across the counter to him.

"Uh, yeah, sure." Nino nodded several times, beaming. "Soon as I get off work."

A few hours later, Marinette and Nino were cleaning up after closing. Nino was wiping the counter with one hand, his other fidgeting with something in his pocket.

"Got something there? Maybe someone's number?" Marinette singsonged.

Nino blushed but didn't speak. That was enough for Marinette though.

"Go ahead, text her. I'll finish up."

"You sure? I'm still thinking about what to say though."

"How about, 'hey, it's the cute guy from Sip'N'Spin.'"

"Noooo," he groaned.

"Why not? It's true."

"It's narcissistic."

Marinette shrugged. "Not really? You're a good-looking guy, and confidence is attractive."

"Thanks?"

"I'm serious. She's clearly into you, so why not flirt a little?"

Nino perked up. "You think she's into me?"

She rolled her eyes, smiling fondly at him. "It was almost as obvious as I am around Adrien."

"Nothing is that obvious."

"And *you* were almost as obvious too."

He shrugged, not denying it.

"Look, you shouldn't be surprised. As previously established, you're hot. You're smart, you make a mean espresso."

"She hasn't had my espresso yet," Nino deflected.

"She will. Anyway. Your music skills are beyond this world and you've got great style. But better than all of that? You're so kind and open-hearted. I think the only reason it wasn't more obvious that you like her is that you always have something nice to say to everyone who walks in that door. You genuinely care about people and their stories, and I know of several people who come here just to talk to you. You're pretty awesome, Nino, and people notice that."

His blush spread, the tips of his ears now a dull red. "Thanks, Mari," he muttered.

"Any time." She pulled him in for a hug. "Now go text her."

7 August

Adrien heard the door unlock and faint whistling over the jingling of keys. As the door opened, he called out. "Nino, is that you?"

"Hey, dude." Nino shut the door behind him and set his stuff on the entryway table before taking off his shoes. He held one upside down over a small cardboard box and knocked it against the side, shaking loose a small collection of coffee grounds.

"You home for the night, bro?" Adrien was sprawled out on the couch, shoulders scrunched against one armrest, legs hooked over the other, laptop resting on his chest.

Nino glanced up from shaking out his other shoe and shook his head. "No, just stopping in for a shower and change of clothes. I'm meeting up with Alya in a bit."

Adrien set his laptop aside and sat up halfway. "Oooh, yeah, how's that going?"

Nino shrugged, but he couldn't hide the grin slowly spreading across his face. "She's pretty great. I mean, she made my website not even a week ago and I've already got double the number of plays I had before."

"You know I wasn't asking about your music — though that's awesome. I knew it was just a matter of people knowing you exist to realize that you're amazing."

"Whatever you say, dude." Nino ruffled Adrien's hair as he headed past him to the bathroom.

"Seriously though, are you guys dating? Because I can give her The Talk."

Nino chuckled. "*The Talk*? I'm pretty sure she knows more than you do about—"

"No, no, no. Not *that* Talk. I mean the 'if you break my man Nino's heart I will end you' Talk. The 'he is all that is good and pure in this world and he deserves to be cherished forever' Talk."

"Dude." Nino sounded a little choked up.

Adrien leaned back over the armrest to catch an upside-down view of Nino's face. "I mean it. She sounds pretty awesome but only the best for my best friend."

"Did you and Mari team up to say nice things about me or something?"

Adrien shook his head, then smiled conspiratorially. "No, but we can. There should be a Nino appreciation day every month. No wait, every week."

Nino laughed. "I think that might start to go my head."

"Well, good. I'd rather you get too much appreciation than too little, and there's no such thing as too much of that. "

"Heh. If you say so."

"I do." Adrien sat up to look him in the eyes. "We love you, Nino, and don't you forget it." He held up a fist in a parody of a threat. Nino bumped his own fist against it and turned back to the hallway.

"Love you too, man. Love you too."



Wayzz ♂ Lv 19

HP 



City Lights and Wine

-InkJackets-

‘Wayzz!’ Nino yelled, excitement thrumming through him. ‘Where are you?’

It had been two years since Wayzz had first been given to him by Ladybug, and he was now Nino’s permanent companion. They were the best of buds and made a great team, though the little god still struggled occasionally with Nino’s rebellious nature.

Wayzz hesitantly peeked out of his hiding place in the bookshelf. ‘Master, are you sure you want to do this? Won’t you get in trouble for breaking the rules?’

‘Nah, li’l dude! My fam won’t even know I’m gone.’ Nino gave him a mini noogie and Wayzz couldn’t help but giggle. ‘Besides, you know Adrien needs this more than I do.’

Wayzz struggled to argue with that. The stress of exams had eaten away at everyone this year. But with his father’s pressures only increasing and his schedule growing evermore busy, Adrien hadn’t been coping well.

Wayzz exhaled as he took in Nino’s pleading eyes, failing to hide his smile. ‘Oh, very well then.’

‘Yes, Wayzz!’ Nino exclaimed, pumping the air with his fist. ‘*Shell On!*’

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Nino stood at the base of the Eiffel Tower, Wayzz tucked safely under his cap, and smiled. Summer was here and he loved it. The city bustled with late-night Parisians and tourists alike, the air was lovely and warm — not too humid and no cold breeze, and the atmosphere was fun and relaxed. He breathed it all in and waited for Adrien to arrive.

The two of them had been planning this night for a while now. Adrien had let slip that he’d never been out late in town, or rather, his father had never let him, and Nino had been outraged. So they’d come up with a plan to sneak out and meet up.

Nino’s smile widened when he spotted Adrien moving through the crowds, a look of awe on his face as he took in the glittering city around him. He laughed when Adrien spied him, waved enthusiastically, and ran over.

The two boys embraced each other.

‘Nino, this is *amazing!*’ Adrien breathed as he stepped back.

‘Summer evenings; I tell you it’s when Paris comes *alive*, man.’

‘I know, like I’ve looked down on the world like this before, but to actually be a part of it...’ He shook his head and stared hungrily at the sights around him. ‘It’s amazing!’

‘And tonight, it’s all ours!’

Nino grinned as Adrien’s eyes blazed.

Nino’s smile never left Adrien’s face as he watched his friend drink in the vibrant world around him. Adrien’s grin was infectious and it lit up the night as they explored the city; wandering through the busy



streets, eating ice creams and crepes, chatting and laughing and simply enjoying themselves for the first time in a long time.

At one point in the night, Nino pulled out a bottle of wine from his bag. He had laughed as Adrien spluttered saying there's no way he would be allowed to drink that.

'We're seventeen!' Nino had cried out, 'We need to be a little rebellious!'

'Maybe my father was right when he said you're a bad influence.'

'Hell yeah, he was!'

Both boys had burst out laughing.

Nino felt the stress of the last few months melt away as they revelled in the evening air. He could tell Adrien felt the same too. He hadn't seen his friend this alive in a long time; eyes alight and full of a carefree energy that came with being drunk on city lights. And maybe a bit of wine.

Eventually, the boys found themselves sitting on the walls next to the Seine, gazing out at the shifting water, lights casting strange but alluring patterns on its surface. The relaxed sounds of people chatting drifted over and the gentle pounding of music bled out from the bars and clubs and into the evening air. It was a beautiful night.

Nino picked up the bottle of wine sat between them and took a sip. Adrien fell onto his back with a sigh and smiled up at the stars.

Nino lay down next to him and turned his gaze to the night sky. It was a surprisingly clear night for the city; a patch of stars shone overhead and a few stubborn ones glimmered further out. The light pollution illuminated the horizon in a soft orange glow, adding its own strange beauty to the darkness.

'One day,' Adrien said softly, 'I'd like to get out of the city, go to the middle of nowhere, and see the stars for real.' Nino nodded in agreement. 'Did you know,' Adrien continued, 'without the light pollution we'd see about two-thousand stars.' Nino whistled. They both fell silent.

'Hey, you know how the sun we see is from about eight minutes ago?' Adrien piped up once more, 'Well that star there? Sirius? It's from eight *years* ago.'

'Seriously?'

'Crazy right? And the furthest star that's ever been observed, called Icarus, is nine-*billion* light-years away! Scientists saw it at a time where our galaxy didn't even exist yet!'

Nino sat up and stared at Adrien, dumbstruck. 'I don't even know if I understand what you just said.' Adrien laughed before sitting up and reaching for the wine. 'How do you know all this?' Nino asked, amazed.

Adrien took a swig from the bottle and shrugged. 'I had a huge space phase when I was little. Couldn't get enough of it. I like legit wanted to be an astronaut,' he smiled to himself.

'What changed your mind?' Nino asked.

Adrien's smile slipped. 'Nothing, really. I just don't have a choice anymore.' He gazed out at the river and took another little sip of wine. Nino's heart fell.

'Okay but say you did have a choice,' Nino asked. 'Would you still want to be an astronaut?'

Adrien thought about it for a moment. 'You know, I think I wouldn't mind being a professor. My father's pressure ruins it a little, but I actually like studying. It's something I can just throw myself into, and forget about real-life responsibilities for a while.' He spun the bottle in his hands. 'That was the one



benefit of being homeschooled. I could study pretty much whatever I wanted and just lose myself to it. And part of the whole space thing was that I loved learning about places that were far from home. It was like, a form of escapism, discovering all the amazing things in the world, in the universe.' He looked down at the wine bottle and sighed. 'I dunno, it sounds kinda nihilistic I guess, but it's comforting knowing that what's going on at home isn't the end of the world. That there's more to life than just the Agreste brand.' Silence swirled between them. Adrien lifted the bottle to his lips and took a sip.

'I have the same deal with music,' Nino said eventually.

Adrien shifted his head to look at his friend. 'Yeah?'

'Yeah.' Nino went oddly quiet. 'It helps me escape the world. Or rather, it lets me create my own worlds. Worlds where I can be free. I dunno, places where I can just *be*, without scorn or judgement... you get me?'

Silence fell between them and the stars twinkled down on them as both boys got lost in their thoughts.

'Remove the "dunno" and that's some solid lyrics right there,' Adrien said.

Nino laughed and gestured at Adrien to give him the wine bottle. He took a swig, letting the rough tannin of the wine rinse out the bitterness in his mouth.

'Is everything all right, Nino?' Adrien asked softly.

Nino looked up. Adrien's eyes were warm and filled with concern.

He hesitated. 'I've just been doing a lot of soul-searching lately.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.' Nino said quietly, not saying anything more.

The water lapped gently at their feet.

'Well, you know I'm here to listen if you ever want to talk about it,' Adrien said gently.

Nino gave him a smile of appreciation. 'Thanks man, I mean it.'

The boys fell into silence once more, but their silence wasn't quiet. Laughter and music drifted down from the street behind them and the soft hum of cars reverberated from across the river. The city lights shone brighter than the stars and lit the world gold, their reflections merging and blurring on the river's surface as it lapped beneath their feet; its soothing noises lulling the boys into contented peace. Yet still, a knot tied itself in Nino's stomach. He closed his eyes and breathed in the warm summer air. It smelt of fruit, and heat, and friendship. He should tell Adrien now, he really should. He stretched his fingers and sighed. But it was scary. He turned his focus back to the glittering world around him before looking at Adrien, at his friend's easy smile and untroubled expression.

A wicked glint appeared in Nino's eye.

'So,' Nino asked, faking casualness as he broke the silence, 'How's everything with Marinette?'

Adrien blanched. Nino grinned.

'I don't know,' Adrien groaned, 'I messed up, man. I messed up big time! I can't believe she had a massive crush on me for like, two years and I didn't realise!'

'How did you not know?' Nino cackled, rocking back and holding his sides.

'Cause I'm an idiot!' Adrien cried to the river. 'You hear that? I'm an *idiot!*' Nino howled with laughter as the water lapped the walls indifferently. But then! *But then!* Adrien continued, 'You wanna hear what's *worse?*'

Nino giggled into the wine bottle, 'She falls for someone else?'



'SHE FALLS FOR SOMEONE ELSE!' Adrien flopped onto his back and threw an arm over his eyes. 'Right as I fall for her.' Nino patted Adrien's head, still chuckling. 'I don't even know who this mystery lover is,' he said.

'Beats me,' Nino shook his head. 'She turns bright red every time I ask her. Not even Alya's been able to get it out of her.'

Adrien sat back up and reached for the wine bottle. 'Ugh, my love life is too depressing.' He took a big mouthful of wine. 'Let's talk about yours instead. How's everything going with Alya?'

'It's...it's going well.' Nino winced. He hadn't meant for his words to come out so somber.

Adrien shifted his head. 'Is something wrong?'

'No, no, Alya and I are fine. More than that actually. We're in a great place.'

Adrien cocked his head to the side. 'Then why do I get the feeling you aren't telling me something?'

Nino gave a wry smile. 'Because I'm not telling you something.' His smile dropped.

'You want to talk about it?'

Yes? No. I don't know,' he hesitated, 'I do but... I don't know.'

The silence swelled between them, broken only by the splashing of water and the gentle background noises of people partying and enjoying the beautiful summer night.

Adrien didn't say anything, but Nino felt his support and comfort fill the space between them.

Again, it was the perfect moment; the moment he'd been waiting so long for. If he didn't do it now, he didn't think he ever would. And that thought terrified him.

Nino's throat grew tight and his heart thumped in his chest. He inhaled deeply and prepared to lay his heart out bare.

'Hey, Adrien?' his voice was low and trusting and held the weight of the world.

'Yeah?'

'I'm bi.'

Adrien gave a soft smile, 'Oh.'

'Don't tell anyone, okay? I'm not ready for the world to know yet.'

'Okay,' Adrien said simply.

'What...What do you think?'

'What do I think?' Nino felt the tension break inside him as Adrien's heartwarming smile lit him up from the inside. 'Nino, you're my best friend. I love you.'

Nino felt a lump rise in his throat. 'Thanks, man. I love you too.'

Adrien passed him the bottle and Nino downed the last of the wine.

'Woo!' he cried as he planted the empty bottle down. 'What do you wanna do now?'

Adrien's eyes widened with surprise. 'Our night isn't over yet?'

'Hell no, our night is just beginning!'

Nino blinked in worried surprise as tears appeared in Adrien's eyes.

'Thanks for this night, Nino. I really needed it,' Adrien said quietly.

Nino pulled Adrien in and embraced him. 'Right back at you, bro,' he said, holding him tight. 'This has honestly been one of the best nights of my life.'









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# Coming Home

-3laxx-

It's been a year now since he had last been in France.

After school Nino had decided it was time for him to travel the world. He had visited his relatives in Morocco and started from there. Luckily, he had gotten all the necessary (financial) support from his father, though he had mostly relied on tramping through the lands if he had wanted to go somewhere else within the continent, to save money and flights.

First had been Africa.

From Morocco, he had started traveling South, past the big desert until he had reached Cape town. On the way there, by train or by car, whichever had been more convenient, he had met many different people and had been able to work here and there. From Cape town he had taken the plane to fly East, landing in India.

There he had stayed a bit. Working here and there, meeting new people and basking in this wonderful culture. But he had moved on after two months. It had been the longest time where he had stayed during this year and he wanted to see more and explore as much as he could.

From then on, he had mostly focused on traveling. From India, he had gone to China and finally, Russia. There he had spent another month before flying to Australia and New Zealand, actually meeting up with Adrien while he was on a photoshoot there.

With Adrien together he had taken a plane to the US where the model met up with a few business partners of his father while Nino had continued his travels. Getting around in North America had been quite easy and he had many opportunities to work as well as get around and do a bit of sightseeing.

Though, admittedly, he had appreciated leaving there again as well. Visiting Canada had been another highlight. Especially since he had been able to stay with a foster family for a few weeks, with whom he was still in contact with now. From Canada, he had gone down to South America, where he had mostly focused on working to save up for his trip back to Europe. This didn't mean that he couldn't still go touring around, though, as he saw a lot of things still.

Then, his skin painted a dark brown from the Southern sun, he had returned to Europe, landing in Italy and starting to walk from there. He hiked across the Alps and through Austria to Germany, before taking another plane to Sweden. There, he had hiked a bit more, especially enjoying the cool temperatures and the relatively safe camping.

From Scandinavia, he had then taken a ship to England, though he hadn't stayed there for very long.

Finally, he had taken a ferry back to France, and setting his foot upon the familiar ground on the French coast had felt pretty weird yet so warm that he wouldn't exchange his home with any other land or culture, even if he had enjoyed traveling the world.

He remembered taking a huge breath in as he stood on the pier, looking out to the sea, for the first time in a whole year on his home grounds again, looking out, instead of the other way around.

The last train ride had been a huge relief. Though, he couldn't deny being a little nervous. He was returning home, after all, this was a huge thing.

He'd see his family again, and his friends.

Especially Alya.



A small pang went through his heart when he thought about her. She had suggested taking a break from their relationship for the time he was traveling, and even if they had chatted almost every day, he was still anticipating meeting her again.

Was she still in love with him? Had she waited for him or did she find someone else to spend her time with?

During his travels, he hadn't exactly asked and she hadn't told him anything. He didn't wanna know, honestly. For that, he was way too anxious, and he didn't want to invade her privacy like that. Though, the question had burned on his tongue every time they had talked over the phone...

With a small cough, he reminded himself to focus.

When arriving back in Paris he had caught up with his family first, as well as with Marinette who had baked a cake for his return.

Then, after resting for a day, he had agreed on a date with Alya, this evening to go to the park at first, talk about the past year, and then to her place for him to show her all the pictures he had taken on his travels. The remainder of the day before meeting her he had rearranged his pictures and put them in a slideshow, ready to let it run through with a click, so he could relax during that.

And now it was finally time to meet her. His hands were sweaty and he breathed faster when he pressed the doorbell for her apartment, being buzzed in by her sisters who had grown up so much ever since he had last heard of them.

The walk up the stairs was one of the hardest he had ever done in his life. He was so nervous about seeing her, his heart was practically pounding out of his chest, and his forehead was a little sweaty. But not from the exertion.

Nino knew he was still in love. He hadn't forgotten about her at all, and he had always carried a small picture of her in his wallet, one that was a little wrinkled and faded over the past months, but he had looked at it every day and thought about her.

She was the one, he had decided.

He wasn't going to let her know this evening, though. He didn't have a ring yet and he had just returned after a year of not seeing each other. Maybe she had someone else, or maybe she didn't wanna be with him anymore.

He'd respect that, of course. People move on and while they had had a wonderful relationship that was put on pause on good terms, he didn't expect Alya to stay. Or to owe him anything, just because he loved her. He wasn't that kind of guy.

Though... He'd be pretty happy if she still decided he was right for her as of now. Scratch that, just "pretty happy" didn't describe the way he'd feel if she chose him after all these months. He'd downright freak out if he was being honest.

Nino had had the easy part of the year, though. He had never stayed anywhere long enough to meet someone he'd be interested in. And even if that night with the guy in Canada had been pretty nice, he had decided he wanted to be with Alya.

She had stayed in Paris for the most time. Started her journalism studies and an internship in a big magazine's editorial department, something she had already talked about in school.

He wondered how she'd been... But her sisters didn't exactly let him wonder for long. As soon as he entered the apartment of the Césaires, he was attacked by the twins and quickly found Ella on his back while Etta tugged on his hand, to lead him inside.

"Where did you go?"

"Did you see the great wall of China?"



“And did you visit Mount Everest?”

“Did you go skiing in the Rocky Mountains?”

“Did you take pictures of the big Jesus statue?”, they babbled so fast that he had the trouble of keeping up, while at the same time asking himself when they had become that good at geography and if they had informed themselves about sightseeing in different countries before he had come home.

“Girls, let Nino breathe for a moment!”, Marlena saved him from more questions as she picked Ella from his back and then gave him a long, hearty hug, smiling widely the whole time, “Oh, I’m so glad that you’re back home safely, Nino. I gotta admit, I was a little worried when Alya told me what you did all the time.”

“Nothing to worry about, Mrs. Césaire, I’m fine and I had a lot of fun!”, he quickly soothed her, then he leaned back and grinned from ear to ear, already giddy and excited to meet Alya. His concerns were long forgotten, “Now, where’s Alya?”

Her mother gave him a conspiratorial glance, then she pointed to Alya’s room and smirked at him without commenting it.

He just shrugged it off, approaching Alya’s door and knocking carefully. Her voice immediately floored him, being so real and unelectronic, just next door. He had missed that.

“I’m almost ready, mom!”

Marlena came up to him from behind and lightly pushed his back, nodding at him.

“She’s dressed and all, she’s just worrying she’s not pretty enough for you yet. Go and tell her she is, she’s driving me crazy.”

Cautiously, Nino opened the door, just sending a quick glance into the room to make sure she was appropriately dressed, before entering and properly looking at her. She had her back to him, studying herself in the mirror to her side and running her hands through her hair to smooth it out, then she made fists to make it curly again.

“I dunno, mom... How do you like it better, smoothed down or curled up like tha-”

As she turned around, the world stopped spinning for Nino. She was gorgeous.

Alya wore a simple red dress that stressed her curvy body and reached the length down to her mid-thigh. Her hair was pinned to the side with one pin, otherwise, she let it flow over her shoulder wildly, knowing exactly he loved her hair as free and unyielding as ever. Her face was only subtly accentuated with make-up, so subtly he almost didn’t notice apart from her mascara that she always used.

Her greenish-brown eyes locked onto his golden ones and he thought he might have to swoon as her face shifted from surprise to relief, her lips pulling into a big smile as she quickly jumped to him and almost threw him to the floor in a tight hug.

“... You-... You look beautiful...”, he choked out, feeling tears prickling in his eyes.

“Th-Thanks...”, she breathed back, and he could feel her chest trembling at her words, “You look handsome as well...”

Nino couldn’t help himself as he pulled her tighter against him, pressing a tiny kiss to her shoulder that made her gasp, but not pull away. Finally, though, as they both did lean back, he could see that nothing had changed between them. As if to emphasize that, Alya slowly got closer to him, her lips brushing over his in a soft kiss.

He melted at that, pushing against her and kissing her back, enjoying the moment before resting his forehead against hers, breathing a little heavier than before, overwhelmed by his feelings.



“... C-Can I keep you?”, he asked, the words slipping out of him before he could stop them, then he gulped as she laughed.

“Yeah...”, she responded, “You can keep me. But not only for the kisses, promise?”

At that, he had to laugh.

Oh no, not just for the kisses. They had a lot of catching up to do, after all.















# I Can Think of Something Better

-Ladybuginettes-

The first time Chat Noir drops in is the day Chris gets akumatized.

Nino's wallowing in bed, an unpleasant mixture of guilt and fear roiling in his stomach, reconsidering every choice he'd made that day, worrying about Chris, about how that akuma would have affected his baby brother when he himself couldn't look at bubble blowers without feeling a sharp throb in his head — and he wonders whether he should turn Ladybug down the next time she comes knocking.

And then someone does come knocking. It's not Ladybug, though Nino does assume it's her for a moment, since who else has access to his fifth floor window?

A head of fluffy blonde hair and a pair of worried green eyes answer that question pretty quick.

Nino's quite surprised to see Chat Noir here, since Chat didn't seem too stoked the first time Carapace came on the scene — and even though subsequent attacks had allowed Chat to warm up to him, he still showed quite a bit of reticence and wariness which, Nino noted with no small amount of resentment, had never been shown to Rena — and Chat hadn't ever really met Nino Lahiffe. But he lets Chat into his room all the same, he's not about to burn the bridge which Chat is clearly trying to build here. Besides, he's probably here to check up on Chris, anyway.

"Hey," Chat says, and his eyes focus on Nino, glowing a breathtaking green in the dim light of Nino's bedroom, "How's your brother?"

"He's fine," Nino replies, feeling bashful all of a sudden. "He's asleep right now though, school night and all that," he adds, conveniently forgetting the fact that he's also a student —and so, he thinks, is Chat — and he should be in bed too since last he checked, it was one in the morning.

Chat nods. He opens his mouth as if to say something but seems to decide against it and turns to leave, but he hesitates for a second before vaulting out of the window.

"I'm glad you're okay. And your brother, of course. I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you—uh, either of you. Especially since you—" Chat cuts himself off, shaking his head. "I gotta go," he says, and Nino barely manages to catch his wrist as he moves to jump.

"Come over tomorrow night," Nino says, "I'll get us some snacks."

Chat smiles, and Nino thinks it might be the most beautiful smile he's ever seen.

The second time is the night Adrien had to cancel a sleepover they'd been planning for weeks. If Nino were being honest with himself, he hadn't expected anything better than this from Gabriel Agreste. Adrien would, for the foreseeable future, be under the thumb of his father, and despite their best efforts,



it seemed like their friendship would always have to fit in the margins of Adrien's increasingly packed schedule.

Chat knocks on Nino's window at 11:01 pm. Nino's wallowing (once again, it's going to be a pattern if he's not careful) but the sight of the cat outside his window lifts his spirits. He's always been a fan of Chat Noir, and he's glad that Chat seems much more fond of Nino the civilian than his frosty reception of Carapace the hero would indicate.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Nino quips as Chat hopped off his window sill. Ugh, Adrien and Chat had clearly rubbed off on him.

Chat beams. It's so bright Nino wishes his glasses had glare protection.

Chat bounds over to flop on Nino's bed, grinning like he's got the most delicious, juicy secret on the planet. Nino's not really in the mood to humor him, but hey, he could maybe text Adrien some bespoke Chat memes later. And besides, Chat's pretty cool. And pretty.

He's jolted from his dangerous train of thought by something touching his nose. It's Chat Noir's finger. Chat Noir is poking his nose with a gentleness that belies that deadly-looking claw but it's still too close to his eyes and he'd much rather not be blind, thank you very much and—

"Hey!!" Chat leaps back ten feet and smacks into Nino's bedroom wall with a yelp. He peels himself off the wall and bounces back with a wide grin and only the slightest amount of sheepishness. He scratches the back of his neck with an almost manic expression, and something about that stands out to Nino, a fact that should be on the tip of his tongue but isn't.

"Do you want snacks?" Nino asks, because he'd stocked up on plenty anyway — his pessimism would not be the reason his best friend would, in the slim likelihood he made it at all, go hungry. Chat Noir nods vigorously and Nino pulls out a large bag of chips from behind his monitor. "I was gonna get myself and my best bud some pizza, but he couldn't make it today. Do you mind anchovies?" Nino asks, already pulling up the Pizza de Nuit website on his phone to place an order.

"This cat loves seafood, anchovies would be purr-fect!" Chat trills, bouncing up and down on Nino's bed. Nino briefly wonders what's gotten into him — Chat Noir's always been pretty... exuberant but not quite to the bouncing-off-walls state that he's currently in.

"Hey, that's cool! Most of my friends call anchovy pizza disgusting but my best bud loves it too. I wish he could be here though, you guys would get along super..." Despite his best efforts and his genuine excitement to eat anchovy pizza with Chat Freaking Noir, Nino finds his words fizzling out, constantly remembering Adrien's careful model smile hiding his disappointment when he video called Nino to tell him he wouldn't be able to make it.

Nino shakes his head and tries to focus on Chat Noir again, but the face Chat's making is familiar. Eerily so. He'd just seen that expression on his screen a couple hours ago— don't be stupid, there's no way they're the same person. Nino shakes his head yet again, and distantly wonders if it's possible to dislocate neck bones by plowing through his stupid thoughts.

The pizza arrives pretty soon, and as he and Chat dig in, he opens Netflix to play a movie.

"What would you like to watch?" he asks.



“Have you watched Fruits Basket? It’s my favorite show and it’s so lovely and I love the characters so much and—” That was exactly what Adrien said the previous day. Down. To. The. Word. The coincidences were a little too frequent to be just that.

Besides, if Adrien liked to drop in on Nino all the time, he probably wouldn’t mind Carapace dropping in. After he stopped yelping and jumping like a spooked cat, that is.

It takes a few weeks, but soon enough an akuma which requires Carapace’s services shows up, and once they defeat the akuma, Ladybug, who’s practically dead on her feet, decides it’s far too late to take his miraculous back wherever they belong and tells him she’ll drop in first thing the next morning.

Carapace gives Chat Noir a bit of a head start, before making his way to the Agreste mansion, doubling back a couple of times when Chat whips his head back, seemingly sensing Carapace’s eyes boring holes into the back of his skull.

Sure enough, when Chat reaches Adrien’s window, he leaps through, performing a couple of flips mid-air and landing perfectly on his feet despite — as far as he knows — not having an audience.

Typical, Nino thinks, with no small amount of affection.

He waits as Adrien hops into the bathroom and chuckles to himself. Adrien emerges wearing — of course — cat pajamas. Carapace waits till Adrien’s about to flop on his bed and knocks on the window.

He did not know Adrien could jump that high.

Adrien picks up his remote to open his window, staring at Carapace with his hair all fluffy and the most dramatic spooked-cat expression Carapace has ever seen. It takes Carapace an incredible amount of self control to not laugh or ruffle Adrien’s hair.

“What’s a fine hero like you doing out so late?”

Oh, so Adrien’s going to try and play it smooth, huh? Well, two could play this game.

“I was just out on the town for a night of fur-n,” Nino winces internally. There’s a very good reason he leaves the puns to Adrien, after all. But he does notice that Adrien’s eyes widen the slightest bit, and he’s sure that if Adrien were transformed, his tail would be lashing.

Adrien lets out this low, whining meow, and Nino sends up a prayer to whatever deity might be up there to let him get through messing with his best bud without a crack in his composure, for heaven’s sake.

“I don’t know fur!!! I don’t know cats!!! Who’s Chat Noir? I’m a clueless little boy!!!” Adrien bursts out.

Nino can’t hold it in any more. He collapses with the force of his laughter, accidentally rolling onto his shell, spinning around till he gets dizzy and can’t pull himself back up. His dizziness is certainly not helped by a little black blob — probably Chat’s kwami —whirling around his head and cackling.

He rolls around a bit, trying to get his bearings, but all that does is add more momentum to his spin and the cat kwami’s laughter. “Wayzz, shell off,” he says, falling to the floor with a sharp thud since he hadn’t accounted for the height of his shell.



Adrien comes up to stare at him while Nino grumbles and grabs at his hands to try and pull himself up to his feet.

“Nino?” Adrien squeaks, seemingly in shock.

“Yeah dude, it’s me.” Nino tries to put on his most reassuring face, realizing what a shock this must be to poor, sleep-deprived Adrien. They stare at each other in silence for a minute

“So,” Nino says, taking a gamble to diffuse the tension, “got some anchovy pizza lying around?”

His question seems to do its job, since they both collapse to the floor yet again, this time with laughter. And when he sees Adrien’s face, alight with joy and humor, his hair in disarray, he thinks to himself, We’re gonna be just fine.











# In Another Life

-You\_Light\_The\_Sky-

*"I know there may be universes out there where I made different choices and they led me somewhere else, led me to someone else. And my heart breaks for every single version of me that didn't end up with you."*

— Taylor Jenkins Reid, Maybe in Another Life

1

In another life, Nino keeps to himself and his music. He hangs out with the members of Kitty Section to talk music, but he doesn't feel very *close* to anyone. In another life, Marinette is friendly with everyone in her class but never feels like she really *belongs* until Alya comes into her life.

This isn't that life. No. In this life, Nino turns right instead of left down the hallways. In this life and the others, Marinette's books are pushed out of her hands by Chloe. And in all those lives, she sits crouched down, hands hovering just above her ruined sketches and furrowed book corners. She closes her eyes and tells herself to breathe.

In this life, Nino sees her like this. So small and alone, yet somehow more than that.

He doesn't hesitate to crouch down and pick up her things. Several words bubble up inside him. Things like *don't let Chloe get you down* or *does she always corner you like this?* But those words pop and disappear as soon as she looks at him, startled.

"Um," Nino says. Lost.

"...Thank you," she ducks her head down, as if ready to sink into the floor.

She quickly takes her things, ready to disappear, vanish, but something in Nino bursts out, "Do you like music?"

Urgh. Stupid Nino. Stupid question.

Marinette stops.

"It's just, I'm a DJ. Well, aspiring DJ, and I wanted some opinions on this new track I made so, if you're free, maybe you could like, give a listen... And let me know what you think?"

Just as Nino internally tries to drown himself, her smile slowly rises like the sun.

"I'd love that."

*Oh*, Nino thinks, looking at that smile. *Oh*, his heart skips a beat.



2

Marinette's *oh* comes when she huddles next to this kind boy and lets his headphones hug her ears, lets this wave of soothing yet spunky music whisper in her soul, and when she looks at his anxious expression, she can only splutter, "T-this is just... amazing? I-it's like you've r-recreated the sound of the universe and I'm only just dipping in!"

She watches as he flushes and waves his hands and insists that there are better DJs and she just has to come by and borrow his records and 'wow, that's too much, I'm not *that* great,' with this smile that seems afraid to smile and Marinette only says, "Yes, yes you are that great."

*And more*, she thinks.

3

Nino waves her over as she stumbles into class (late, again). For a minute, she stares like a deer caught in traffic.

Then he winks and whispers, "Saved you a seat!"

Marinette feels warm all over, so warm she fears her skin will melt in blushes "You don't have to do that. I can sit wherever."

Nino's hands flutter up to tug her sleeve. "Yeah, but, we're friends now, so yes. I have to."

"Then I'll pay you back!"

Nino laughs, and Marinette thinks she's found a sound even more delightful than his music.

"That's not how it works!"

But he doesn't complain when she brings him sweet pastries every morning.

4

"You call this music? It's just noise. Complete garbage. You'll never be a *real* DJ," his grandfather's words echo in his head all day at school and Nino loses himself to those poisonous words. Sure, he's not as close to Gramps as his parents would like him to be, but it still *hurt*.

Listening to tunes, being able to hear the soul in them and then rework them into something that's *his soul* intertwined with the beats of those that inspired him... that means the world to him. If he can't even reach his distant family with that message, with *his* music, then maybe he's not a real DJ after all.

Marinette taps him on the shoulder. "Your grandpa still doesn't approve?"

Nino just shrugs.

Her face falls. "I'm sorry. I can't imagine what it's like for a relative to disapprove of your passion. If my parents didn't support my designing, I don't know what I'd do... But... for what it's worth, I think you're a real DJ. Here."



Carefully, she coaxes an embroidered baseball cap into his hands. Sewed carefully in green cursive is *#1 DJ*.

"...Made it for you."

Nino wears it every day since.

## 5

Ladybug crashes through Nino's window but before he can freak out, her transformation drops and all he sees is Marinette.

"Holy—!"

"Sh!!!" She presses herself against him, hands over his mouth. "Don't tell anyone who I am, please! I was just, really freaking out, and the akuma was so strong, and Tikki was losing energy, and I didn't know where else to go, and please tell me I can trust you and that you have some cookies or something sweet lying around somewhere because the akuma is still out there--"

Nino doesn't hesitate, doesn't need any time to reconcile that *the* Ladybug is the same amazing girl he's best friends with. Of course she is.

"Just tell me what I need to do."

## 6

The nights and days as Ladybug wears on Marinette. In another life, her grades might suffer, she might feel isolated from her best friend Alya, might feel the pressures of the world fall around her.

But in this life, she falls asleep on Nino's shoulder during class and he protectively wraps his arm around her. He'll give her the notes for class later.

## 7

"No, no, no, no, Marinette, Nette! Please answer me!" Nino digs and digs in the wreckage of the collapsed school. He didn't see her transform. Only a split-second before the akuma destroyed the school and she pushed him out of the way.

He's supposed to be her support, the one she goes to for strategy sessions, for notes, for back-up cookies. He's supposed to be her... her...!

"...Do you want to protect her?"

He sees a turtle-looking thing similar to Tikki, peering at him from an old man's shoulder.

The next time Marinette wakes up, she's in the arms of a green-hooded figure with a familiar smile and strong chest. She blushes, even more flustered than when Nino first smiled at her, when he whispers, "Just bear with the pain for now, Nette, and *transform*."



It's him. She knows him. Her hero.

8

The mysterious Master Fu calls Nino (Carapace) her partner. Her *chosen* partner. Someone Marinette's heart chose first. Wayzz and Master Fu chose him as soon as they knew her heart did.

Now Ladybug isn't the sole superhero of Paris anymore. Now she has Carapace. A partner.

She puts her hand over Carapace's and whispers, "I'm glad it's you."

9

It's an accident, really. The two of them racing across rooftops in the rain, when suddenly Ladybug loses her footing. She falls and Carapace reaches out to catch her only—

They both fall together, in a heap against a poor rose bush. Maybe it's the moonlight, maybe it's their heartbeats louder than any DJ track Nino's made, but...

They lean in. Lips touch. And they don't let go.

10

He writes her songs made for angels and she weaves him clothes meant for kings.

In another life, they are happy.



# PARIS WEEKLY

BONUS: HOW THE CITIZENS  
ARE GIVING BACK THIS HERO'S DAY

CHARITY BALL SET TO HELP  
THOUSANDS OF AKUMA  
VICTIMS

LOCAL HEROES RUMORED TO  
BE HONORED GUESTS

## CARAPACE; PARIS' KINDEST HERO

AN INSIDE LOOK TO THE GOLDEN-HEARTED  
MAN BEHIND THE MASK (pg. 4)





# THE INSIDE

AUGUST 2019

EXCLUSIVE BY  
ALYA CESAIRE

Carapace

DJ CARAPACE

WHO IS BEHIND THE MASK?

*Ally*







# Paint Me in Trust

-Samantha-GirlScout-

Something had been up with Adrien for a while now.

Sure, there was the usual caginess that he had when it came to his superhero secret. A secret, which, Nino wasn't strictly supposed to know about. But, he'd known for a while now.

It was almost insulting to their friendship how Adrien thought he could get away with the same excuse over and over again and think that Nino wouldn't figure it out. It also didn't help that Adrien had this habit of stopping by Nino's house to chat *as* Chat Noir, either.

The exact manner Nino had put those pieces together was a story for another day, though.

Putting all of that aside, Nino couldn't help but notice just how... awkward his best friend had been over the past few months. Every conversation with Adrien was stilted. Chat Noir was far less suave whenever he stopped by. He'd even picked up some of Marinette's stuttering.

Which would have been cute, if it weren't worrying Nino endlessly.

After a while, Nino had finally had enough. Whatever was going on was affecting Adrien constantly. And Nino couldn't stand seeing his best friend suffering any more.

It was just the two of them in Nino's room doing homework. They were nearly done, which meant that it was getting close to Adrien's time to go home. And, as time had gone by, Adrien had progressively become more tense. More awkward.

More... uncomfortable.

Nino set his pen down on his desk, turned to Adrien who was sitting on his bed, and said: "Alright, what's going on."

Adrien nearly jumped out of his skin at the interruption of his thoughts.

"What. What do you mean?" A wide (obviously fake) smile spread across his face and Nino couldn't ignore how squeaky his voice was.

"That." Nino pointed directly at Adrien's face, the smile fell immediately. "You've been acting really weird lately. Is your dad bothering you?"

"N—" Adrien coughed when his voice cracked. "No. He's actually been pretty chill lately."

"Okay. Then is it something that I did? 'Cause, dude, if I've done something, please let me know. I'd never want—"

"No, no!" Adrien said. "No. It's not. It's not you. We'll I mean... No. No, you're good." He smiled fondly. "You're really good."



Nino didn't exactly have all that much time to unpack how *that* made him feel, so he pressed on.

"Then what is it? Because, I'm not gonna lie, I'm worried about you."

"It's..." Adrien looked away as he shrunk a little in on himself. "It's nothing."

Nino wasn't sure when he'd crossed his arms, but he purposefully uncrossed them. He wasn't doing this right. He knew that being too confrontational with Adrien could backfire. But he was just... so tired of this.

Time to see if he could still salvage this conversation before Adrien ran away from it.

"You know that you can tell me anything and it'll stay between us, right?"

"Yeah..." Adrien sighed. "I'm just... scared, I guess."

"What are you scared of?"

"I guess I'm scared of what you'll think of me?" Adrien scratched at the back of his neck and looked everywhere, but at Nino. "That you'll stop being my friend if you don't like what I have to tell you.."

Oh.

So they were doing the identity reveal thing right now.

Nino felt even worse, seeing how conflicted Adrien looked right now. From the numerous conversations that he'd had with Chat Noir, he knew that Adrien felt terrible keeping his identity a secret. Especially from his best friend.

"Look." Nino reached across to where Adrien sat and squeezed his knee. "No matter what I'll always be your best friend, alright?"

Adrien laughed. "Actually. I... That's. That's kind of—"

Adrien groaned as his words all of a sudden left him. Nino stayed silent and let him work through whatever was going on in his head. It wouldn't be right for him to force a confession out of him.

Nino watched as Adrien took a deep breath. He schooled his own face, ready to not react poorly. And then—

"I like you. You know as... As more than a friend."

Oh.

*Oh.*

Nino started going over all of the signs in his mind's eye, but Adrien didn't give him much of a chance to process this new revelation. Instead, he immediately began speaking again.



"It's totally okay if you don't!" Adrien began flailing his arms around. "It's just. You asked and I'm already lying to you about so much I—"

He cleared his throat before continuing. "Please don't feel pressured or anything. I thought keeping it a secret was the best course of action, but apparently I didn't do a very good job of it."

His laugh sounded hollow.

"Sorry if it makes you uncomfortable." Adrien started packing his things up, hurriedly. "I'll just. I'll—"

"Hold up," Nino said. He stood from his chair and hesitated a moment before sitting beside Adrien on the bed. "Gimme a sec, okay? Just gotta process the fact that you weren't hiding some other big secret or something."

Adrien cocked his head to the side in confusion. "Like what?"

"Like you were... Ladybug or something." Nino barely caught himself. Now wasn't the time to have *that* conversation since apparently they were having *this* one.

"Oh. Uh yeah, don't think I'll be Ladybug anytime soon."

"Right."

Nino took a deep breath. If he was being quite honest, the idea of being something more with Adrien hadn't really even crossed his mind. He'd been so focused on trying to be the *best* friend that Adrien had ever had.

But now that the idea was there...

He couldn't stop thinking about it.

"Okay," Nino said after some time had passed. The exact amount escaped him and he only had half an idea of what to say, but he'd figure it out as he went along.

"First off, whatever we decide, this doesn't negate us being friends."

Adrien's eyebrows knit together. "It doesn't?"

"Of course not," Nino said with a smile. "Anything else would just be... a bonus. *If* that's what we want."

"Right," Adrien said.

Some of the tension in Adrien began to drain out of him. Nino was glad to see him a lot less uncomfortable than how he had been for weeks now. He was still nervous, obviously, but it was nice to see him not on the verge of throwing up on a constant basis.

"Gotta say dude, you had me worried that there was something terribly wrong with you or something."

"No. Just a uh crush and a dumb plan."

"A plan?"



Adrien looked away, an intense blush starting to cover his face. “Until tonight I- I’d thought of telling you a different way. It was going to be pretty embarrassing, so probably dodged a bullet there.”

“I dunno. I’d be pretty interested to hear what you’d planned.”

“You’re just going to make fun of me,” Adrien pouted.

“I would never...”

Nino burst into laughter the moment Adrien leveled him with a look that clearly stated his disbelief.

“Okay, okay,” Nino did his best to control his laughter. “How about I promise to not make fun of you? No one has to know how much of a sap you are. Yet.”

“Yet?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure if we start dating there’d be no hope.”

A hopeful look crossed Adrien’s face.

“Okay,” Adrien started. “Well, I was planning to ask if you were busy Thursday after school. If you weren’t, I was planning to walk around the city with you until I got up the courage to give you your birthday gift and then ask you out.”

“So, no roses and grand dinners?”

Adrien shot him a glare. “I wasn’t going to trick you into a date, Nino. Besides.” Adrien sniffed in a way that was quite reminiscent of Chloe. “That’s for, like, date number three.”

“Sounds pretty cheesy.”

“I thought you weren’t going to make fun of me,” Adrien pouted.

“I never said I didn’t like cheesy,” Nino laughed nervously.

The idea was still pretty new, and made him a bit scared himself of messing up his friendship with Adrien. But the more they talked and joked about it, the more the idea of dating Adrien grew on him more and more.

“Oh?”

“Yeah,” Nino laughed as he tugged at the brim of his hat. “Though you’d probably have to rein it in a little bit. Kinda new to all this...”

Adrien’s eyes lit up.

“That’s okay! So am I!” He *beamed*. “We can take things slow? Or. Or not at all. Not at all is cool too.”

“Um... Slow’s good? Maybe?” He still wasn’t sure how he felt about all of that.



“Play it by ear?”

Nino let out a breath. If he was being honest all of *that* didn’t necessarily appeal to him. It never really had. But, some of the little stuff that came to mind, especially the idea of holding Adrien’s hand, really stirred up some butterflies in his belly.

“Yeah. that sounds... good.” Nino took a deep breath in an attempt to quell the butterflies that were starting to become a real nuisance as this conversation continued on. “We could start with that date you had planned?”

“Walking around town until—” Adrien started, snark turned up to eleven.

Nino rolled his eyes. “No, no. The one after that.”

“An elaborate date with dinner and flowers?”

Nino really wanted to wipe that smirk off of his... off of Adrien’s face.

“You’re really making me regret my decisions.”

“Sorry.” He didn’t especially sound all that sorry through his laughter, though. “How about a movie after school on Thursday? My treat?”

“Sure.” Nino smiled. “But no funny business in the theatre.”

Adrien put a hand to his chest, faux scandalized. “I would *never!*”

Nino squinted his eyes in jest for a few moments before they both broke into a fit of laughter. It helped to lighten the tense air that had been between the two of them for a while now. There was a new feeling in the air now, but it wasn’t nearly as foreboding. In fact it was light and exciting.

Nino wasn’t sure what was going to happen next, but he was looking forward to it.



+ Lyorphe









# Racing Through the Dark

-GuardianKarenTerrier-

"Hey, babe." Alya's hand rests on his shoulder for a moment, squeezing once before she vaults over the bench to sit next to him. "What's up?"

Nino leans back, adjusts his cap so it doesn't fall, and wraps his arm around Alya's waist. "D'you think they're patrolling tonight?"

He doesn't have to tell her what he means- it's Alya so he rarely has to explain himself anyway, but this is something they were clearly already on the same wavelength about. "Sort of. I think they've probably found, say, their own park bench to sit on and talk. At least I hope they did."

"*Do* you think they do that? Talk about it, I mean?" Nino carefully doesn't turn to look at Alya. He didn't actually think to tell Alya that he was here. He's not very surprised that she's shown up anyway.

Alya rests her head on his shoulder and takes his hand. "I think it doesn't matter whether or not *they* do, babe, I think what matters is whether *you* want to."

Nino swallows hard and tips his head back forwards, cap sliding down until the brim shades his eyes. "I think I do, Alya. How- how did you know?"

"Nino," Alya sits up carefully, adjusting his hat so she can see his eyes. She smiles at him. "I know you. Also, you called Ladybug dude, like, three times in one sentence."

That startles a laugh from him. "I was nervous! Weren't-" He looks around, but it's really late. The park is long deserted, the detritus of the earlier picnic long since cleaned up. They aren't really supposed to be here, but Nino knows he can get out of sight very quickly if he needs to, and he knows now that Alya can as well. "Weren't you?"

Alya's quiet. After a moment, she murmurs, "I think I was too busy being excited."

"Yeah." Nino breathes out hard. "It's- something. I felt like-"

"-like you could do anything?" Alya completes. She gets up, pulling him after her. "Like you could just, do all the rooftop running and all kinds of flips and all kinds of things you *wished* you could do?"

"Okay, you're right, talking about it is a relief," Nino acknowledges, laughing and scratching at the back of his neck as he follows Alya further into the park. "Now I *am* wondering if they talk about it."

Alya turns to grin at him, mischievous in the dappled light from the streetlight on the other side of the fence. "We could always go find them and ask."

Nino stares at her. His heart is thudding and he doesn't want to explore why all that closely.



Her eyebrows arch. "You haven't tried it yet, have you? Nino- babe, you can still do it. You don't have to be transformed to do it, it helps but *you can still do it.*"

He takes a deep breath and when Alya laughs, a sparkling note that seems to linger in the night air, and then takes off running he takes off after her.

Alya's fast. Nino's fast too, but Alya's faster, and he thinks of Chat Noir's flicking ears and lashing tail and wonders if he's imagining that he's slower than the others or not.

Alya takes sharper and sharper turns, veering into alleys and bouncing off fire escapes, and sometimes he can't see her at all and has to rely on the glittering sound of her laughter to guide him. He *can* always hear her laughter, but- he doesn't really think that's a Miraculous ability.

When he does start catching up (when she starts letting him catch up) Alya immediately ups the stakes. She starts kicking off of walls to change direction quickly, darts up to first floors, chimney-climbs to a roof from an especially narrow alleyway, and pinballs between different buildings every chance she gets.

They're speeding up, Nino realises gradually as he reaches out to tag Alya and she tugs her shirt from his hands with seconds to spare. They're speeding up and Alya may well be following his laughter just as much as he is hers.

Eventually they come skidding to a halt at a bus stop, still laughing. Nino is laughing in between his panting now, bent over with his hands braced on his knees, and Alya is laughing *at* him because she's noticeably less winded.

At some point it began to rain, so they take shelter in the bus stop. Nino blinks at the giant advertisement of Adrien smiling down at them. "Man, that's honestly beginning to really weird me out, you know? I keep, like, accidentally trying to say hi to posters now."

Alya snorts and leans against the advertisement, brushing off her sleeves. She's been a lot more willing to ricochet herself off of and between buildings than Nino is yet, so her clothes are covered in a fine layer of dust and grime. "I mean, it's easier to actually hang out with the *billboards.*" Her face lights up.

"You know that's not his fault- Alya, come on, we're not climbing a billboard." Nino gives her a pleading look, still hunched over.

"Come on, I know you wanna see if we can do it," Alya challenges him, and yeah, okay, she isn't *wrong*, so.

It takes them ten minutes and a lot more quiet giggling, but they make it up their chosen billboard (another one of Adrien, because they agree on that).

They get their answer as to whether Ladybug and Chat Noir have gone out patrol.

"Quiet," Alya breathes out unnecessarily, because Nino's seen them too, and he's not about to wake them.

Ladybug's back is pressed up against the billboard, legs dangling over the side, head tilted back and mouth half open as she snores. Chat Noir is twisted up sideways against the billboard at her side, his head and arms across her lap, and Ladybug has one hand resting between his shoulder blades. One ear flicks back every so often as he breathes slowly.



"Is he *purring*?" Nino whispers, and Alya elbows him quiet.

Alya sits down herself and Nino sits down beside her, close enough to keep an eye on the heroes but far enough away to at least try and avoid waking them. Nino can't imagine that they don't both have well-developed battle instincts by now but they were apparently both tired enough to fall asleep here, so.

Alya doesn't suggest leaving, to Nino's relief. Now that they know Chat Noir and Ladybug are here and *vulnerable* it seems wrong to leave.

And if he can protect them now, maybe he can feel like he's redeemed himself for letting himself be akumatised during their earlier battle.

Some Hero's Day it's been.

Nino sighs and lets his own head tip back, blinking up at the night sky. There's far too much light pollution to make out more than a handful of stars, but he strains his eyes trying anyway.

"Babe," Alya says, very softly, wrapping her arm around him and pulling him into her side. "I know, Nino, me too. But we were doing *great* as a team before that, and- you know, maybe we just need more team training?"

They both look over at Ladybug.

"Do you think she'd agree to that?" Nino asks, keeping his voice down and shifting uncomfortably. The billboard is, he's rapidly discovering, *not* the most comfortable place to sit.

Although Chat Noir at least looks *perfectly* comfortable.

Alya shrugs, nestling further into Nino's side. "I think Chat Noir would agree. And she listens to him."

"Yeah, but he doesn't-" Nino stops, blinking. "He doesn't know who we are."

Alya gives him a strange look. "Secret identities?"

"Ladybug knows our identities," Nino says, staring thoughtfully out into space. "And we know each others. And Chloe Iron Manned it, so."

"Nino?" Alya asks, cautiously.

He breathes out hard. "Doesn't really seem fair that he doesn't know who anyone is. Does it."

Alya nudges his shoulder. "You know you can't tell him."

Nino shakes his head, leaning into Alya enough that her hair tickles his neck. "Dude. I know, I'm not gonna, not after-" He swallows, seeing flashes of the fight in his memory. He shuts his eyes only for them to snap open again right away, because that turns out to be nearly the exact opposite of helpful. "He used our identities against each other."

He senses Alya's wince more than he sees it. "Yeah, so that's another point in the *don't tell him* column."

Nino slumps against her now. "Do you think they did better than the rest of us 'cause *they* don't know each other's identities?"



Alya shrugs him off and turns towards him as much as the limited space will allow. The lighting of the billboard puts half her face in shadow, surprisingly reminiscent of Rena's mask, and Nino flinches a little internally as he registers that the light might make it obvious that they're all up here.

Then again, they hadn't seen Ladybug *or* Chat Noir until they'd climbed up themselves. The more experienced heroes probably have a fairly good grasp of where they're more hidden than he might think.

"Nino, babe, I think they did better because they have got *way* more experience than the rest of us," Alya says firmly, twisting lithely around until she can put her hands on his shoulders. "We'll get there, you know?"

"Even though we probably can't do the team training?" Nino asks, trying hard to keep doubt out of his voice and probably not succeeding.

Alya's hands slide down to grip his upper arms instead and her voice and smile both turn teasing. "Isn't that what we just did?"

Nino stares at her. Distantly, he's aware that Ladybug is starting to stir and they'd better go soon, but they have at least a few moments before they have to climb down.

Alya's grin widens. "Listen, I've got some new ideas for date nights..."











# Revenge is a Dish Best Skipped

-Niyes-Lahiffe-  
(Spiderman AU)

*The thug clad in black moved against his restraints violently, but it was no use. He was stuck. The web coating him seemed to be getting thicker and stronger the more he moved, but that didn't stop him nonetheless, absolute panic shooting through his veins as the superhero in front of him stepped closer maliciously.*

*"P-Please!" the man begged, shaking his head vigorously. "I didn't do anything-ah- PLEASE have mercy!" The battle between him and Spider-Man a few moments previous was ruthless, and the burglar was proud of the few vicious blows he was able to land on his opponent, but to no avail. Spider-Man had unfortunately won this one.*

*"Please..." he pleaded once more once Spider-Man was finally nose-to-nose with him, and a whole new surge of fear flowed through him at the sight of the golden eye behind the hole in his mask, a golden eye that was filled to the brim with pure, unadulterated fury.*

*Spider-Man lifted his mask just barely above his lip to reveal his baring teeth and dark skin. "You killed the person closest to me. I'm simply doing what should've been done a long, long time ago."*

*The bandit closed his eyes tightly, preparing for the worst.*

*But nothing came except for the abrupt sound of loud police sirens. When he opened his eyes again, there were police cars everywhere, along with flashes of blue and red, and Spider-Man was gone.*

Nino stared down at his mask, coated with a few stains and a hole in one eye, seemingly staring into his very soul. Horrific memories flooded through his brain the longer he looked, though he couldn't find it in him to tear his eyes away: obnoxiously loud police sirens, Nino knowing he was already too late as his adrenaline blurred out his scream of pure anguish, the mortified look on his cousin's - no, practically his big brother's - face before-

"Hey, Nino."

Nino practically jumped out of his suit, startled enough that his mask slipped out of his clothed fingers. During his stuttering frenzy, the superhero managed to sling a web from his wrist to catch his mask before it fell further towards the busy street below, quickly bringing it back up to his chest as he turned to his guest.

"GAH- A-Alya, hi! I-uh-I was just UH-I'm-!"

"It's okay, don't freak out." With a soft smile, the reporter lifted her hands in a soothing gesture. Her smile, however, grew into a smirk the longer she looked at his panicked face. "I already knew you were Spider-Man, Nino."

He stared at her incredulously as she took a seat beside him. "H...How?" She didn't answer, instead giving him another knowing grin as he took the moment to look around. "How did you even get *up* here...?"

They were both currently sitting on top of the flattest yet highest point of the Empire State Building. Alya didn't seem to care at all as she stretched and leaned back, obviously not the slightest bit alarmed that at the moment her feet happened to be dangling off one of the tallest buildings in the city.

"I have my ways, Spidey-boy," she winked.

"Alya, did you *scale the building*?!"

She put one of her fingers on his lips and shushed him. "Listen, how I got up here doesn't matter." Her expression suddenly turned worried and serious, causing Nino's mouth to quickly clamp shut. "I know I need to talk to you."



A moment of silence passed between them as Nino turned his sad eyes back to the open city far, far below them.

In a voice so soft that he could barely hear her, she said, "I was there, you know..."

"When?" His voice was suddenly hoarse, his gaze unmoving.

"Both times, Nino." He didn't realize his fists were clenched tightly until she placed her hand gently on his. "I was there earlier today, during the...incident." A tear fell down Nino's cheek and she used her other hand to quickly wipe it away. "And I was there, a year ago when...when he was killed." Nino visibly flinched as another tear fell down his cheek, once again wiped away by her thumb. "Nino..." Alya delicately placed her hand on his cheek farthest from her and turned him to face her. Cupping his cheeks, she didn't continue until their eyes met. "You need to know that I'm so *proud* of you."

His puffy eyes grew wide and perplexed. "P...*proud*? Why?!"

"I know plenty of people who would've jumped for the opportunity to exact revenge against someone who killed someone close to them. And I don't mean just fighting them and taking them to jail."

He blinked slowly, expression glum.

Alya smiled softly. "Most would think that killing them back would be the right thing to do. But it's not. Nino, *you* did the right thing in capturing him for the cops!" She wiped away another one of his tears, which were flowing freely now. "I know it had to be hard for you."

"Oh, it was horrible," he agreed, laughing lightly, though it was humorless.

"But you did it!" she continued encouragingly, pulling his face closer to hers excitedly. "You did it and you're going to be okay!"

For the first time in a while, he smiled genuinely. He sniffed once more before pulling the girl next to him into a tight hug, murmuring his thanks. She smiled and squeezed back with equal fervor, and soon they found themselves swaying in a gentle rhythm.

When they pulled apart, his face was contorted in a small yet dopey smile. He croaked, "Yeah...yeah I'm gonna be okay..."

"That's the spirit," Alya chuckled, punching him playfully on the shoulder. "Now c'mon, mister spider, you've gotta take me down from here."

He rolled his eyes but stood up along with her to put his arm around her waist. "What, you got up here somehow and now you can't get down?" He smirked at her as she giggled maliciously. "You ever gonna tell me how you actually got up here?"

"Some things are better left as secrets, Spidey-boy." She mischievously flicked his nose.

"You mean things like...secret identities?" he pressed, leaning closer.

Now it was her turn to roll her eyes. "Whatever. Just get us out of here, please."

"Whatever you say, *princess*." He ignored her ornery protest as he slung a web to the nearest building and leaped.















# So This is Love

-Mari-Cheres-  
(Cinderella AU)

“You have until midnight.”

Alya had heard Trixx tell her that dozens of times, going so far as to almost accompany her to the ball and make sure she didn't overstay her welcome. There had been plenty to worry about, and none without its good reasons. She had left the house, and the slightest hint she had attended would leave to Alya getting locked up for all eternity, if not longer.

Still, she couldn't lie and say it wasn't worth it. It was a dream come true, coming to the ball. And with a mask hiding her features, Alya could marvel and admire in peace, free to linger in certain areas without the usual sense of fear coming over her.

Even now, she was entranced with the glamour of the palace. Unable to stop herself, she let her hands reach out, touching the beautiful statue that graced the hallway leading to the ballroom, of the man who the ball was arranged for.

“The prince is handsome, wouldn't you say?” a voice behind her spoke, but Alya didn't turn her gaze their way, preferring the still figure before her. She let her gloved hands fall onto the sculpted face's cheek, wondering if he'd be as smooth as the marble.

“Yes, I suppose so,” she answers after a moment, keeping half a mind to be polite. Alya wondered if the sculpture was accurate to his features, or if the prince was possibly even more handsome in person. “Whoever catches his fancy tonight will surely become a lucky girl.”

“Indeed, they will. Have you met him yet?”

Alya laughs, pulling her hand back from the statue and instead adjusting the mask on her face, hoping to further conceal her identity. “No, not yet. I don't see myself going out of my way to.”

“And why is that?” they asked, watching as she drew her hand back up to the sculpture again, this time running her hands over the indents in his face.

“Well, I haven't gotten the courage to even step inside the ballroom. It's a bit unnerving meeting royalty, wouldn't you think so?” She tilted her head, curls falling onto the side of her cheek, eyes trained on the statue. Alya wondered if it were an embellishment on behalf of the artist, or if his Majesty really looked how he did in marble.

“I would say you're perhaps the only lady in the whole kingdom not jumping at the chance of meeting him. You do recall this ball is so the prince can find a wife?” the man behind her asked, chuckling.

“Yes, but do *you* recall that capturing his favor amongst a crowd of eligible young women is doubtful?” she responds, pulling her hand away from the sculpture.



"Perhaps. But who is to say the prince won't have a keen eye out? Anything is possible at a ball such as this."

Alya frowned as she gazed at the statue, at it, at *him*. Just how could someone, even dressed as beautifully as she, capture the prince's attention at such a high scale and wondrous event like this?

There was no doubt within her that the prince would have his eyes out for someone who could keep up with the everyday life of a royal. Certainly not a maid, and most definitely not one who was bound to those who owned the estate she lived and worked at, someone who just hours before had been forbidden from going to the ball and had gotten the help of her enchanted godmother.

Alya sighed, tugging upwards the sleeves to her gloves and raising a hand to her mask once more, pushing it deeper into her skin. Trixx had promised her it wouldn't fall should she remember to leave before midnight, but Alya felt it become more of a habit to calm her nerves, a reminder she didn't have to hide her thoughts, no matter who might be around her.

"In any case," she says, "I find it unlikely I would gain his attention, or his affections at that."

"Well, not to sound frank, but I feel as if I speak for the prince here when I say you've caught mine."

He laughs, finally prompting Alya's curiosity.

Just *who* was the stranger behind her? An aristocrat, or perhaps a member of his royal court? She turned her body around, eyes peeling away from the statue to lock onto the stranger. Instead, Alya finds herself staring at none other but *him*, cheeky grin on his face and a gloved hand extended outward. The statue she had spent so long admiring, now before her and come to life, complete with eyes that darted to her mask tried to guess what lay underneath it.

"Oh my! Prince Nino," she gasps, before ducking her head quickly in an attempt to be respectful. She bows, going so far as to step backwards and give her prince some space. What Alya forgets, however, is how wide her dress is and doesn't take many steps before she's almost tipped over the sculpture, arms quickly moving backwards to grab it and hold the statue in place. Nino's arms come forward, holding Alya steady as she does so, hands locked firmly but gently above her waist. Her cheeks burn at the contact, and it takes all in her to set the statue upright again, unsure if she or the statue was more unbalanced.

"That would've been a problem," he says, smiling at her and motioning his head behind her, where the statue now lay upright. "I'd have a lot of explaining to do to my father."

"Your father."

"My father," he repeats, letting out a laugh that makes her brain go fuzzy. "I don't think I need to explain who he is, right?"

*The king*, she answers in her brain, a simple enough connection to make yet one that makes her legs go weak. Alya blinks up at him, eyes looking down at her with an intensity she couldn't quite make out.

The sculpture was a lie. He was *much* more handsome than it had shown, down to the way his skin just *glowed* in the candlelight and she was sure would shine in the moonlight.



It takes her a second to realize his hands are still clasped at her sides, and Alya blushes. Although they hadn't touched skin to skin, she realized even with a gloved hand, *the prince* was holding her!

Nino seems to realize at the same time she does, and moves his hands away quickly, taking a step back in an attempt to keep formal distance between the two. He adjusts his gloves quickly, and Alya wonders if as a prince, it was his first time coming in contact with a citizen of the kingdom. Even more, she wonders if he would be so bold as to try and come in contact once more.

"Would you care to dance?" he asks after a moment in silence, listening to the musicians in the ballroom letting out a soft tune, one gorgeous enough to aid even the most incapable in dancing to manage a few rhythmmed steps. Alya looks at the closed doors and wondered how they'd manage to make it towards the dance floor without a crowd surrounding them, surrounding the *prince*.

And then, Alya thought with a fright, how could she dance with the prince and not be spotted? She couldn't draw too much attention to herself, or else they'd know she went.

Alya frowned as she thought, unaware of the way his face dropped at her expression.

"It's fine if you don't want to. You're not under any obligation to do so don't feel any need to force yourself to join me in a dance if- " Nino starts, attempting to apologize before she could even voice her thoughts. Even though he had just come face to face with the masked beauty, he felt his nerves spike up.

"No," Alya interrupts, uncaring if she stopped the prince from continuing on. She cleared her throat, stepping closer. "It's not as if I *don't* want to dance, Your Highness, but it's just... I wouldn't want to have so many eyes on me."

He nods, a smile coming over his face as she explained. Reaching for her hand, he gently took it, leading her past the ballroom doors and the guards, to where the garden lay, empty and beautiful in the night.

"We can still hear music, if you would prefer dancing here. I'm not so fond of the people's eyes myself," Nino says, stepping deeper into the garden and looking up at the moon.

Alya didn't hide her grin, touched that the prince would be so understanding and caring. He was much gentler than she thought as well, and it wouldn't take much convincing for her to believe her dreams were coming true right before her eyes.

"Shouldn't a prince be more outgoing?"

"Of course. But still," he says, eyes crinkling as he smiles, "I suppose there are a few exceptions to those expectations."

"Well then, I'll assume you'll lead, your Royal Highness?" Alya asks, stepping more into the garden.

"Please, just call me Nino."

Swaying across the garden floor, the only light illuminating the two the moon and stars above them, Alya felt her heart soar. Nino was a talented dancer, and while she struggled to keep up with the quick movement of his feet, she didn't feel as if it was a one-sided dance, but instead a duet of sorts, the two blending and working off the other's steps.



"So, care to tell me a bit about yourself?" Nino asked after a moment.

"There's not much to tell," Alya says. "I'm sure my life isn't as interesting as someone royal's would be."

"You might be mistaken." Nino dances them around the fountain, feet keeping in time with the music. "Balls and celebrations do little to keep someone happy if they aren't alongside someone."

"And is there no one for you?" she asks. Someone like him, not only so high in stature but so handsome, couldn't have been as lonely as he spoke.

"Well, I do have my closest friend," Nino says. "He's more than enough company. Although, I feel the person I want alongside me goes further than just a friend."

"Further than?" she asks. "Who could that be?"

He smiles, teeth as bright as the moon. "A partner, of course."

Alya's cheeks grow warm at the realization, that the ball wasn't *just* to find a wife. No, perhaps he sought something else at this ball, someone who would go beyond just the word of wife.

She nods, continuing to sway with him. "Well, I've never been to a ball before, or the palace even. It's certainly interesting to me, even the tiniest bits," Alya mentions.

"That I know. If you had attended any before, I would've spotted you." Eyes darting up to catch hers, Nino quirked a brow. "With or without the mask, for that matter."

"You're quite charming," Alya tells him, smiling. He takes another step, then twists her around. Back pressed to his body, Nino pulls her closer.

"You're quite something yourself," he tells her, her curls brushing against his face. She looked back at him, blinking upwards.

Nino *certainly* was a sight to behold upon. The longer she stared at him, the more Alya felt under a trance.

He trained his gaze on her eyes, so wide and welcoming and beautiful. Although the mask did conceal most of her features, Nino felt a warmth on her face the closer he grew to her. And with that, he wondered if she felt warmth from his face as well.

"Your Highness?" Alya whispers, watching him suddenly look much closer than he had before. Butterflies start up in her stomach, fluttering and dancing together.

"Call me Nino," he says, voice low.

Eyes still on her, moonlight dancing off her skin and the ballroom music coming to a climax, Nino leaned in.

The clock chimed before their lips touched, bringing Alya out of her daze. She blinked, then separated from Nino quickly, looking around the garden for an exit. Spotting a staircase leading down, she made for it.



“I have to go!” she exclaimed, grabbing the sides of her dress and rushing quickly down the steps. Alya wasn’t sure how long she’d have until it all turned back to her rags, but wouldn’t wait to find out. “It’s *midnight!*”

Nino steps after her, intent on catching up. “But I never got your name, or- “

“I’m terribly sorry, your Highness, but- “

“Wait!”

“I’m sorry!”

She left nothing but the mask, planted right on the bottom of the stairs. Clutching it gently, Nino hoped he would soon find the face that lay underneath it, the person who had captivated and left him entranced. Looking off at where she disappeared, he hoped it would be easy.

And while it didn’t take as short of a time as he had wished for it, when Nino finally came across her after such a long search, he had never been so glad to be with her.

To be with *Alya*, his Alya.



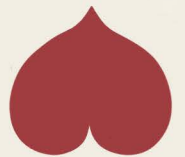
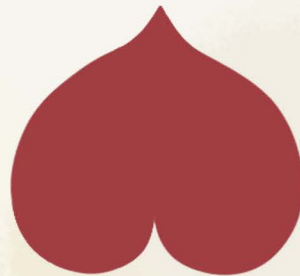








J



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*Art by [signature]*



# Sunset to Sunrise

-SoupInBoots/MiracleSoup-

It was just barely sunrise. The golden rim of the sky slowly began melting into it's familiar pale blue hue. The heavy foggy haze of morning dew had yet to lift from its place atop the gardens of Parisian citizens, and while the streets still hummed with the sound of a stray vehicle here or there, for a city that was normally teeming with human life, it was quiet. Silent enough for even the meekest of songbirds to be heard amongst the breezes and early morning commutes. And quite frankly, that was just the way he liked it. Being an up and coming DJ had its perks, an obvious one being the busy night life, but that also limited the number of patrols he could take as Carapace. Ladybug was understanding of course, but to make up for it Nino made a habit of taking the early morning patrol. Despite his busy nights, taking the early morning worked out well since he was likely still awake from the night before, juiced up from the gallons of energy drinks he'd consumed over the course of his set.

It didn't even matter that he hadn't slept as the mornings were usually low on crime and akumas. The odd purse thief might come through every now and again but could easily be stopped with a quick shelter and a stern talking to. Really, the mornings were for Nino. He called it his morning patrol, Alya dubbed it his morning escape, and the rest of the miraculous squad seemed set on calling it his "Nino Time" Whatever it was, it was nice. It was his time to sit atop a rooftop and take in his surroundings and decompress. No fighting, no being cooped up in the center of a busy and sweaty club, no blasting music so loud half of Paris could hear it. Just him, the view, and the rooftop. All of which were occasionally joined by a muffin or two. It was quiet. For once in his busy life it was quiet. And that's just how he liked to end his busy mornings. Sitting alone before bouncing back to his and Alya's apartment to sleep in until he was needed once more, like a slumbering giant only awoken once in every milenia. But for now it was just him and the occasional stray cat who also happened to be taking in the view as the sun rose dutifully into the sky, and a city of 2 million slumbering civilians woke.









Lunian





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# The Face of Love

-RadamaZard-

There were many things on Earth that Adrien had loved at first sight. His mother and her warm, gentle smiles. Romantic Comedy movies and how they always ended happily and well, despite all the hurt that happened throughout the films. Ladybug, and how she bravely pushed passed her fears and insecurities to be the beautiful, ass kicking bad ass she was.

Yet none of these had lasted. His mother? Missing for years. Rom Coms? A lie that could never be his reality. Ladybug? A brilliant and wonderfully close friend still. A best friend! But... perhaps his love for her had been immature, had boarded on praise and idolment.

And none of them had been able to be there once his father had kicked him unceremoniously to the curb after one too many fights and some particularly sharp words had been exchanged. But you know who had been?

Nino.

Nino, with his eyes like liquid amber, flecked with the most glistening of gold.

Nino, with a smile so genuine that it crinkled at the edges, and a laugh so full that it often left him heaving and making those silly, cute little gasps.

Nino, with his hands as soft as his heart was big, who cupped Adrien's cheeks and whispered that he'd never be alone.

His first guy friend, who'd stuck by his side since the day they'd met as awkward, lonely teens. Who now, at eighteen, held his hand and gently tugged him into his apartment. There were no words as he brought in Adrien's bags and sat them in his bedroom, and none were needed as Nino pulled the blond into his arms, letting him weep upon his shoulder.

"You don't gotta tell me what's up, Dri," Nino told him, with the same tenderness as his embrace that held his best friend close. "But you're free to stay here for as long as you need, 'kay? Heck, you're free to stay here forever if you want!"

Nino's laugh, that bubbled and cracked in ways that he'd once playfully teased him for, left Adrien feeling warmer than he had in a long time.

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"He said WHAT?" Nino cried out, looking just about ready to leap from his sixth floor window and tear out Gabriel's throat out. And if it wasn't for how tight Adrien was gripping his hand, he may very well have attempted it. "That bastard! Who the fuck talks to their son like that? Like seriously, fuck him, dude! You were right to chew him out!"

Adrien hadn't felt like he had. At least, part of him hadn't. Another part was near delirious with giddy joy for having finally fully stood his ground, for having refused to hold back and letting his father know just how he felt. Of course it had cost him a hom-



No. Not a home. Homes were meant to be warm and safe and where you felt free to be yourself. And that mansion? That wasn't home. No, home was...

Forest green flickered up to Nino's ranting face, filled with such a righteous fury, mixed with a great care and compassion for his disowned best bro. Home. Home was like... like Nino.

Home was on the brunet's beat up old couch, with the cherry tart stains from last New Year's, courtesy of some very awfully excellent puns on his part. Where they'd laughed and snored and cried. Home was by Nino's side, as they huddled together in a big old blanket and watched crappy horror movies. Home was in Nino's arms, holding him tight in joy or sorrow, always knowing he was safe and accepted and oh so loved.

"Ya know what, Dri? Fuck it! This is your home now! Sure, it's only got one bed, but hey, it ain't the first time we've snuggled down together. If you want your own I'm sure I can work something out. Maybe clear out my studio, I've been meaning to pair down anyway..."

Adrien felt his heart simultaneously warm and skip a single, fluttering beat.

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"Seriously, man, it's fine! It's about time I got to be the one to spoil your ass anyway," Nino insisted with a grin, as he held out the lopsided ice cream cone for Adrien to take. Which he did, albeit with a look akin to tentative guilt.

"I know, it's just... you're already doing so much for me. I can't pay any rent or help with the bills or groceries..." Adrien trailed off, dropping his gaze to his shuffling feet. "I'm already enough of a burden on you, I don't wa-"

Chocolate ice cream was smashed to his lips before he could even hope to finish talking, and even if he were to try, Nino's sudden serious gaze was enough to keep him quiet.

"You are NOT a burden bro, okay? Don't you think that for even a second!"

"Bu-"

"No buts!" Nino cut in, so sharp that Adrien near flinched. Yet seconds later that harsh edge was gone, leaving behind a gentle pleading that left his breath lifting. "You're never a burden to me. Ever. Okay? Not now, not in the future, not even when you're being a total bratty brat who need a swift soda to the face. I freakin' love you, Adrien, and Plagg with crave Kraft Singles before I regret having you with me for even a second. You got that?"

It wasn't the tears that glistened, nor the trembling smile that clued Adrien in to just how he was feeling. No. It was how the cold hollowness that had dug it's way deep within his soul, something he'd grown hauntingly used to, now sprung to life with a roaring fire... A love that blazed like none before, made him feel blinder than he thought possible.

How had Adrien never noticed just what he'd had by his side, just WHO he had by his side? Just how blinded by his own fantasies and expectations had he been?



Because falling for Nino wasn't like in the movies. It wasn't a spectacular moment of fireworks and gentle sighs as the sun framed his love's smiling face. No. It was quiet and familiar and comfortable, but new at the same time. Like an old sweater that was now a favourite.

And in that moment, with Nino wiping away his tears without a lick of judgement, Adrien couldn't imagine a person he'd rather be beside.

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Honestly he wished there was more he could do.

Nino deserved sculptures of flowers, declarations written in the sky! The most fancy of chocolates and candle lit dinners at beautifully romantic restaurants.

Yet all he could afford with the remains of his scrounged savings was a derpy turtle plush and a bouquet of flowers on sale. At the very least they were sunflowers though, the one bloom he knew Nino had a certain fondness for. But still, in Adrien's eyes he deserved so much BETTER.

Maybe though, just maybe... it would be enough.

Maybe he could be enough.

So with a swallowed breath Adrien readied himself, standing right by the door as it swung upon, revealing a shocked Nino, exhausted from a long day at the radio station.

"I, uh... There someone you're tryin' to surprise, Dri?" Nino chuckled, a certain nervous energy just barely noted. "Trust you to try to woo someone the hella classically cute way. So, who's the special girl? Or guy?" There was a hint of hope there, that drove Adrien to feel bolder, to attempt to channel his inner alley cat.

"Only the cutest guy around~"

"Cutest guy, huh? So you're surprising yourself then?"

When since had Nino became one SMOOTH motherfucker? Not that he'd let that deter him!

"Nope. It's a guy who's cuter actually than me. I know, I know, surprising, huh? But it's true. He's cuter than me... both inside and out. Really though, it's his kind heart that won me over. So loyal and supportive. So willing to do everything he can to make his friends smile, to bring them what joy he can."

Oh how wonderful it was to watch Nino switch from amused to hopeful to near holding his breath, unable to keep his cheeks from blazing like the sun above.

"He... He sounds like a real catch, huh? Must be one hell of a guy to get such a glowing report, my dude," Nino muttered, feigning his glasses were smudged just to give him an excuse to clean them. To not have to look Adrien in the eye just in case he was wrong.

"Oh yeah. You're definitely one hell of a guy, Nino," Adrien whispered, pressing his megar gifts into the blushing man's hands. "And maybe... maybe you wanna be my guy? Like, romantically. You know, like a boyfriend and all..."



The anxiety that flittered through him was awful, as Adrien watched Nino silently admire the flowers and chuckle at the wonky eyed turtle. Carefully they joined his keys on the door side table, before he finally lifted his gaze to meet Adrien's nervous eyes.

"I'd have to be freakin' nuts to say no to an offer like that," Nino replied, with a chuckle so warm that Adrien finally felt free to release his breath. Not that he had time to steady it, as Nino swooped right on in, until their foreheads just barely touched. "Nothing would make me happier than to 'be your guy', you ridiculous ass dorkasaurus!"

Oh how freeing it felt to laugh, especially when that laugh was against Nino's lips, a kiss that was more giggles and smiles than anything Hollywood. Adrien wouldn't have traded it for the most perfect kiss in the world.

For nothing could be better than this. Than Nino's giddy giggles snorts, making his glasses fog and slide down his nose as he stole kiss after kiss in all his beautifully dorky glory.

To Adrien, THAT was the face of true love.





كان يا ما كان في قديم الزمان...  
once upon a time....





Ferry  
ixellet

CARP



# The Power of Carapace

-Their Destiny's Writer-

Being part of Team Miraculous was the last thing Nino ever expected to happen in his life. The idea that he would become one of the core superheroes of Paris was insane. Especially for someone as chill as him.

But he was proud of it. Even if he didn't consider himself one of the greats.

Sure, he was genuinely picked for the job, unlike Chloé. But his part rarely ever had him on the offensive. Most times he ended up protecting his teammates. Or trapping the akuma. Or... cats, so they wouldn't jump off the tree while Ladybug went to get them for their owner.

He didn't mind, of course. He loved his teammates and would do anything for them. But he had to admit, sometimes he wished he could do more. Seeing how sometimes the enemy was charging towards one, or several, of the others and he wasn't fast enough to protect them was often frustrating.

That thought was especially prevalent the first time he ended up as the last hero standing.

It was a minion-making akuma. Hundreds of citizens had been turned into armored soldiers holding long spears. It wouldn't have been much of a problem, if the minions hadn't turned out to be more agile than they looked.

It didn't take long for Ladybug and Chat Noir to become overwhelmed and send for help. They managed to get Rena Rouge, Queen Bee and him, but they didn't have time to get more heroes. So, most of them focused on clearing the path for Ladybug to get to the main akuma.

Unfortunately for the young superheroes, it wasn't long before they had been cornered on top of Le Grand Paris Hotel.

While they had managed to fight off most of the villains, soon enough the team had been overpowered. To Carapace's luck, he had managed to reduce the numbers around him with Shellter, sending them flying off the building the second he activated his power. And it was that moment that enabled him to see the disaster that had been happening around him.

Carapace watched how every single one of his teammates was restrained. There was no way he would have enough time to save them all. Sure, his shield could bounce, but he would still have to sacrifice at least two of his friends. And that just wouldn't do.

He could almost swear everything was moving in slow motion, as his mind tried to think up a plan to get them out of this mess. He saw how Ladybug was trapped with her own yo-yo, as the akuma minion continued pulling on the cable. Chat Noir had lost his baton, and had his hands tied by his own belt. Queen Bee was being lifted off the air by the waist, her arms stuck to the sides.

And Rena Rouge. One of the minions had grabbed her flute and was holding it against the neck, suffocating her.



What was he supposed to do? Why did no one tell him what to do if he was ever the last one standing? *Think, think, think*, he repeated in his mind, causing an almost opposite effect. He proceeded to take a deep breath, hoping that that would give him enough concentration to come up with a plan.

A thought started nagging in his brain. Something that felt important, but it wasn't his thought. It didn't feel like it came from him. It was like it came from someone else.

*Wayzz?* He wondered.

He could feel his heartrate increase. His knuckles clenched. His leg stepped back. He took a calming breath.

"Shutter speed!" Carapace yelled on instinct.

His body was suddenly filled with new energy, and his surroundings slowed down. The next second, Carapace was running. But his surroundings were off.

Everything around him was standing still.

It felt like a second for Carapace, but it was much less time than it seemed to him. It took him a moment to realize the power he had just summoned. Nothing was standing still. He was simply moving much faster.

With a new spark of confidence and adrenaline, Carapace ran to the first minion he found, holding onto Rena Rouge. With less effort than he expected, he was able to pry the enemy's hands open, leaving only his girlfriend to hold the flute.

Next, he moved to Ladybug, unwrapping her from the string of her yo-yo. As he finished, he swung it around the minion's leg, for good measure. He then ran across the area to grab Chat Noir's baton. Close to his teammate, he extended the staff and separated it in two batons.

Just as he was placing them in the cat boy's now freed hands, he could swear they started moving.

*Uh-oh. Time's up!* Carapace's mind ran, looking for a solution for his last teammate. He looked at Chat Noir and could almost swear he heard a ding go off in his brain. Hoping that he would have just enough time, he took one of Chat Noir's hands and pulled it upwards and back. As if readying it to throw the newly acquired baton. He only hoped Chat Noir would figure it out quickly.

And then, time moved again.

There was a simultaneous clatter, as all the changes Carapace made while in Shutter Speed took effect. As that happened, he slammed the minion attacking Chat Noir on the face with his shield. Somewhere behind him Rena Rouge swung her flute against the one who had previously trapped her. To the side, Ladybug pulled on the yo-yo and send the bad guy flying.

And Queen Bee let out an indignant screech.

Thankfully, it was enough for Chat Noir to react and throw one of his batons at the enemy holding her hostage. The weapon knocked him out cold, and the bee hero was freed.

"What was that?!" Ladybug heaved. The team shrugged their shoulders. Carapace, on the other hand, bashfully raised his hand.



"It was me," he said. "Apparently I have super speed too."

"Too?!" Chat Noir gasped. "You got your second powers?!"

"And you couldn't rescue me?!" Queen Bee complained.

"Sorry, Bee. Ran outta time."

"Ugh." She flipped her hair away. "Ridiculous. Utterly ridiculous."

"Carapace just used a new power, and *that's* what you focus on?" Rena Rouge huffed.

"Carapace!" Ladybug exclaimed, running towards him to shake him from his shoulders. "How did you do that?! That was amazing! How did you get your second powers to manifest?!"

"Desperation?" Carapace said in an uneven tone caused by the shaking.

"Probably necessity," Chat Noir chuckled.

"Or maybe because he's the only one who actually thinks before acting," Rena Rouge argued.

"Dudettes and dude," Carapace called out, stopping Ladybug from turning his brain into pudding.

"Wayzz just thought I was ready. But that's not what's important right now. What matters is that we can keep going after the akuma now. No need to leave anyone behind."

"He's right," Ladybug immediately pointed out. "We have to get going, before Carapace's time runs out-,"

"I'm actually not beeping," he said absentmindedly, looking at his fully-lit miraculous.

The others gaped.

"Ugh, unfair!" Queen Bee crossed her arms.

"We have to go," Chat Noir chimed in, pointing at incoming minions. "We can discuss Carapace's awesome developments later. But right now, we have to hurry."

The others nodded their heads in agreement, and finally started off towards the akuma. Carapace, on his part, with an exaggerated grin on his face.

A green light washed over Nino, as he called out his transformation in a hidden alley. Because apparently now he couldn't detransform otherwise.

"You did amazing," Wayzz complimented, the second he was out of the bracelet. "I knew you were ready for the new powers."

"You sure you didn't just want to show off with your charge?" Trixx shot back.

"No arguing you two," Ladybug scolded, with her hands outstretched, ready to take back the miraculouses.



Nino and Alya exchanged looks. With newfound hope, they said their goodbyes to their kwamis, promising to be ready for whatever came next. Then, the little gods disappeared into the jewelry and were given to Ladybug.

"Nino," she called, as he and Alya had turned to leave. "I have to say that, what you did today, was beyond spectacular. You really saved us all. Thank you."

"No prob'," Nino said bashfully. "I was just doing what needed to be done."

"It was more than that." Just then, Ladybug's earrings gave another beep. She gave the couple a look of 'business as usual', right before swinging away.

As Nino looked at the distance to where the leader of the team disappeared, he was almost knocked off his feet when Alya pounced on his arm and rubbed her face against it.

"I'm so proud of you," she cooed. "A little jealous, I'll admit. But mostly proud."

He chuckled. "Don't worry. You heard Trixx. You'll get your new powers soon."

"I hope so," Alya sighed wistfully. "We could be Rena and Carapace for as long as we want. Maybe get some dinner, or ice cream. As superheroes."

"Sure," Nino laughed, placing a hand over hers. "But how about some ice cream as civilians instead?"

She shrugged. "Fine. But only if it's Andre's."

"Anything for my girlfriend," Nino said.

With her still holding onto his arm, he led her out of the alley to find the famous ice cream seller. So maybe he didn't have the most offensive powers. And maybe people would rarely see him doing the biggest saves. But what mattered was that the people he cared for the most were safe.

And that the one person he had a ring saved up for could see what he did and be proud of him.











# The Small Freedoms Around Some Corners

-3laxx-

*(Royal Prince AU)*

Nino smiled to himself as he watched the maids chattering happily, sauntering down the hallway with currently nothing to do. He knew his mother was in the city with his father, so her servants had half the day off to do some side tasks or some background organizing, like cleaning the royal chambers or rearranging the wardrobe.

If he was being honest, he envied them. For having something to do, that is, for having a daily workplace to show up to, for having a firm regime to serve, for having these manners that he could only dream of.

Of course, he had manners, it was included in his training to be a proper prince.

However, well...

The servants had a different kind of manners. They had-... Empathy, genuine concerns, they actually cared. Knowing how to bow properly, remaining one's cool when faced with difficult situations, the table manners, royal etiquette... It was all a big act. Spreading one's arms in the morning to be dressed by the servants, having a strict order for behaving in meetings.

He was just lucky to be the third in line for the throne. He had two older brothers, both equally fit for the role of a king. Well, sometimes he wished he was first in line. Not to be in power, that was decidedly not his thing, but to actually have something to do.

As the third in line, as the second youngest prince, he was basically useless. Standing around for ceremonies, for political debates, and-... That was basically-... It?

Well, he, as a rather unimportant part in the whole reign thing, had to travel around, give the people enough of royal closeness to feel validated and to stay loyal.

He enjoyed that, not to get him wrong!

But as much as he liked talking to the simple people and telling his brother of their concerns and problems, that wasn't a real job. It wasn't that he knew what he'd be doing on days where he was not needed, nor that he was free during these days. He was still strictly monitored. Not necessarily by his parents or brothers but more so the entire social status. The rich and influential people watching him, the lower nobility and all the political figures sauntering around within the castle halls.

He was not allowed to work hard to earn anything, nor was he allowed to be free when he wasn't, per se, working.

The maids vanished around a corner and he sighed, leaning against the stone wall. How fulfilling it would be to be unimportant, to have a task at hand that needed to be completed. To be free of the complicated bureaucracy, to have a right and wrong to be doing something and not worry about the right choice of words or the right movements in front of ambassadors, royal guests or important members of the nobility congress.

Well, technically these servants feared him as much as he feared state affairs. Except for two, that was. He once again risked a glance around the corner, but the two maids hadn't returned yet. Oh well, he figured, maybe he could allow himself a little walk around the castle grounds without being see-



“... What’re you doing?”, a voice ripped him from his thoughts, making him jump and press back against the wall while holding his chest. His heart beat so fast as if he was just caught doing something forbidden. Well, following two lower-class women as a higher-class man wasn’t exactly forbidden in this time, but it certainly was not approved of. And the way he had been raised by his parents, following women no matter which class was not tolerated anyway. So, technically, he had been caught doing something forbidden.

His rushed gaze met curious green eyes that followed every move he made. But in contrary to state meetings with important people, he didn’t feel monitored with the prince who stood in front of him now.

Adrien from the house Agreste, coming a long way from the neighboring kingdom, was his age and they had become close friends when they had been teenagers, as soon as they had been old enough to travel and thus, meet. Ever since the lone son of the mighty king Gabriel had used every opportunity to ‘refresh the trade relationships’ with the kingdom that belonged to Nino’s parents. Luckily for them, their parents had good trade relations and thus, Adrien’s father allowed him to visit every so often. He didn’t need to know that it was mostly to visit Nino’s sincere and heartfelt house, contrary to Adrien’s cold castle that left no room for friends or fun. In that regard, Nino was fairly happy to have been raised in a house such as his.

“You nearly made me jump out of my skin, Adrien...”, Nino murmured, trying to calm his beating heart, “How is it that you can sneak up to anyone as silently as a cat?”

The blonde with the attentive eyes merely laughed and wrapped an arm around Nino’s shoulders, patting his back.

“This secret, my friend, I will never tell. But now, what were you doing?”, his glance went down the empty hallway, however, the happy giggling of the maids could still be heard echoing through the sound catching inner yard, next to which the princes stood. A knowing expression spread on Adrien’s face, so smug that Nino liked it less the broader the grin became on his friend’s lips.

“You were spying on a particular maid, weren’t you?”, he inquired and the young man’s usually tanned skin grew bright red.

“... I was not.”, he tried, yet the other prince knew his friend too well. He did not have a chance.

After a short pause of the gears turning in Adrien’s head, he finally grabbed Nino’s hand and began pulling him down the hallway, laughing quietly, “Come on, we will relieve them from their duties for a moment!”

Nino’s heart immediately sank at the thought of being with Alya, even possibly spending a few more minutes with her than he usually was allowed to, at the possibility of speaking more words with her than was accepted for a prince speaking to his mother’s maids.

“W-Wait, we can’t just kidnap them! They will get in trouble, *we* will get in trouble!”

Adrien merely rolled his eyes at that, chuckling disarmingly and continuing to pull him along, now reaching the corner around which the girls vanished.

“Then we’ll tell your parents we had urgent matters to attend to and decided them as our servants because they were the first to grab. Come on!”

Adrien’s grip on his hand was strong, and honestly, his heart pulled in the same direction, making his feet stumble after his friend instead of slamming the heels into the ground. Faster than he’d admit later, he had given up and the louder the chattering became again, the longer became his steps and the less Adrien had to pull him along.



The two princes skid around the corner and Adrien cheerfully called out to the maids, who promptly turned around. Alya began smiling at the sight of her queen's second youngest son and Marinette immediately turned bright red at the sight of the lean and athletic prince from the neighboring kingdom running towards her.

The blond quickly let go of Nino's hand, looked around to check if anyone was spying on them, and didn't even slow down as he grabbed the black-haired girl's hand, immediately pulling her along.

"Come on, m'lady! We'll go outside!"

Nino was not far behind, though he nearly stopped before falling right into Alya, just so arranging his steps to stumble around her and regain his balance, offering his hand instead of just grabbing it as Adrien did in his impetuous spirit.

"... May we?", he asked, putting on a lopsided grin that was absolutely not allowed in front of people of his class.

Alya, a maid with long, wavy hair that was currently tucked under a cover, and a curvy body that was hidden under the traditional linen dress that maids were provided with, grinned right back at him and took his hand. She didn't need a second invitation from him to agree to break out from the tense atmosphere in the castle, especially not if the prince asked her.

Nino grinned even broader, pulling her along and running after Adrien and Mari who had a fairly big headstart by now, their goal being the private lands of the royal family.

Only as they left the last stone steps behind and the first corn in full ear slapped against Nino's legs, he felt free. Nobody could watch them here since there were only servants' rooms facing out to this site and all the servants were at work at the moment.

No nosy nobility, no gossiping castle folks, no ambassadors looking down their noses at Nino, and he knew that even if a servant happened to be observing them, they wouldn't say anything. They knew of the friendship Nino shared with the prince and the two royal maids and never complain, quite on the contrary. Through this, they knew the prince as a kind boy who never made a difference between class.

Adrien and Mari started dancing in circles as they had passed the field and came onto their favorite place to play silly games and spend the time in summer, a small patch of grass between the lands with a few apple trees and bushes to hide them from view.

A loud laugh escaped Nino's burning throat, watching his friends cheer in the happiness of being without worry for the first time in days, but as he turned around to Alya his laugh suddenly got blocked in his throat as she was suddenly very close to him. Her greenish-brown eyes caught his own and he felt the smile that radiated from her face besides being captured by her gaze.

Slowly, as they fully got to a stop, behind some bushes to block the view, he faintly heard Adrien whistle as a sign that they were alone and thus he leaned down, pushing his lips onto Alya's.

The girl in front of him sighed in delight, her arms wandering around his shoulders and neck, before he locked his arms around her waist and in turn lifted her up, starting to spin around as their friends had done before.

"... Someone's desperate for love...", Alya giggled against his skin as he set her down again but he merely nuzzled her nose, shrugging while keeping her close.

"State affairs are boring. I'd rather be with you."



She laughed, throwing her head in her neck and letting her long hair brush against his bare arms since she had lost her cover somewhere in the field. They would have to go search for it before sundown, Nino supposed. It'd catch attention if she needed a new one again.

"Well then, your majesty, make the time worth the while."

He laughed, letting himself fall back against the slight incline of the hill, keeping her on top of him, then he pressed his lips against hers again and lost himself in a deep kiss with her, until Adrien fell on his knees beside them, his face reddened and his lips swollen, indicating he had taken his own time with Marinette as well. The black-haired maid stood behind him, her hands on her knees, and a big grin on her face.

"C'mon, lovebirds, let's collect some firewood before sundown and make a bonfire. I wanna sleep outside and watch the stars!"

Nino laughed as he let Alya get up first, pulling him up along with her.

"You'll carry full responsibility for that, lovesick fool."

But honestly, Nino didn't complain about the offer. The idea sounded dreamy and really, who would miss them. Sure, Alya and Marinette were on the job but his mother knew of their spontaneous meetings, as well as his little relationship with her maid, so she wouldn't reprimand them.

Nobody needed either of the princes in their bed overnight, they just needed to check in to confirm that they were safe.

And otherwise, nothing else contradicted this choice to spend the evening. If they instructed a few servants they would even be able to have a tent here and a bit of wine.

Nino grinned. This promised to become a great evening.

He gave Alya another long kiss, then he kissed her forehead and grinned at his boisterous friends.

"Let's find Alya's cover and get two tents to sleep in, as well as the good wine!", he promptly said and his friends cheered.











# The Stars Welcome You Home

-Val-  
(Gods AU)

"You called me, my lord?" Adrien knelt down in front of Nino, who raised an eyebrow at him.

Nino didn't understand why Adrien was down in front of him because they were friends; Adrien wasn't his worshipper or anything like that. "Rise, dude- I mean, *friend*."

"You still have a lot to learn, don't you, God of Music and Melody?" Alya clicked her tongue in mock disapproval from a dark corner of his temple and Nino saw the way Adrien's eyes shifted towards her.

"I'm still new to this. I wasn't born into it like you, dudette." Nino retorted with a grin, "But I suppose I should consider that I'm better at something than you are, Alya. I don't fall in love with people that have shorter lifespans than I do."

Nino felt a sharp pain on the back of his head and he knew that it was Alya's doing. She was the Goddess of wind, after all.

"You're in love with me?" Adrien blurted out with a look of disbelief in Alya's direction.

Nino began to turn away from the scene as Alya looked ready to kill him on the spot. He was an immortal, but he wasn't immune to getting injured. And Alya would do a number on him if she got the chance to have her hands on him. For now, Nino mused, she had Adrien to worry about and he had a lot of questions concerning their relationship.

---

Nino would be lying if he said he didn't wish he had something similar to what Adrien and Alya had.

Alya had advised Nino to find someone he could spend the rest of eternity with, like she had with Adrien. Adrien was still a mortal, but Nino knew Alya could change that in the blink of an eye if she decided to take him as her husband later.

Nino was chosen because of his pure heart by the old Gods who had passed, the kind he read when he was younger in story books, and the next thing he knew, everything he thought hadn't existed previously, did. he was around his twenties when he almost died and was chosen.

Exhausted, he took off his sandals and slowly began to put his feet in the river that was in front of him.

"What are you doing dipping your feet in my river?" A voice shouted from behind him, "Just because you're some high and mighty god, you think you can do what you want?"

Nino was surprised and jumped back from the cool waters and he stood up to meet a beautiful young woman with the darkest hair he'd ever seen and although she was short, she was a ball of fury as she put her foot down angrily.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know-"



"Didn't know what? That there were people living here? I will have you know that my father, Tom, is the God of the Sea and waters." She placed a finger on his chest, "I'm not some small water nymph who's going to let gods and goddesses like you."

"I really didn't mean any offense. I'm new to all this stuff and I have no clue what I'm doing or why I'm even here. Is there any way I can make it up to you?" Nino took her hand in his own hands and she gasped, covering her mouth with her other free hand.

"I am so sorry." She began to pull away and Nino let go, afraid he'd hurt her. " Gosh, I've just had a really bad morning with people polluting my river and having to clean it out myself. I'm not in the best of moods right now."

"It's not your fault." Nino could understand the frustrations of cleaning up after other people's messes. In his past life, his old "friends" always left him to clean up after their messes and it was hard to be happy and alright at the same time. His old life before he was handed his new life on a golden platter and before he had met Alya and Adrien was miserable. Music had been the only good aspect of his old life. "I completely understand."

"Well, I have to go home to my papa before dusk and I have to finish cleaning up another section of my river." Marinette began to back away and she was about to dive in the waters, when Nino stopped her.

"Will I be able to see you again?" Nino asked, a bit hesitant and a bit anxious at talking with someone as gorgeous as her for so long.

"Yeah, if you can find me. But you already found my river, so you should have no trouble finding me, unless I'm hanging out with Alya." Marinette replied before he could say anything else and he was in awe. Nino blushed thinking about her and the feeling blossoming in his chest made him rethink every negative thing he had ever said about the life that was chosen for him.

Maybe it was time he accepted the new beginning that was handed to him, his chance to start over and finally be happy.

---

"He's got love written all over his face." Alya teased as Nino picked up the harp and she nudged Adrien.

*She's not wrong*, Nino smiled secretly as he began to pick up his tune. It wasn't his preferred instrument. He preferred to DJ, but they didn't have that here and it took a toll on him to even summon an instrument, he couldn't imagine how much of a toll it would take for him to summon everything he needed to DJ. He was still new and learning under Alya's care.

He had spent the past few months trying to woo Marinette, the lovely water nymph he had met previously. He played music for her and there was one particular song that she enjoyed. It was one she had overheard once in the mortal world and seeing as he was the God of Music and Melody, he managed to recreate it for her on the harp. He loved seeing her smile and the way she closed her eyes as she swayed along to the music.

Even now, sitting with his two closest friends, all that was on his mind was her. After helping her every day for the past few months with cleaning her river, he had finally gotten the courage to ask her out.

---

They had on their usual night stroll. Marinette was covered from head to toe in fabrics that matched the spots and colors of a ladybug. She had already told Nino why she dressed that way (to avoid her father, who didn't want his only daughter out during the night).



"I wanted to ask you something, Marinette." Nino was anxious and he felt like he was going to puke. It wasn't this hard when he practiced with Adrien and Alya. But maybe it was difficult to get the words out because he loved her so much.

"What is, Nino?" Marinette answered softly and Nino turned to her, a warmth spreading across his cheeks as he gazed into Marinette's breathtaking bluebell eyes.

"I've had a great time...with you, dudette." Nino coughed, breaking his gaze away from hers, "And you're my best friend. I enjoy every minute I spend with you. I think-"

"Nino, watch out." Marinette shouted, tackling Nino down behind a bush.

"What's going-"

She clamped a hand over his mouth and she was trembling. Nino tried to take a peek at who it was, but Marinette was still holding him down.

"Marinette Dupain-Cheng, if you don't come out right now, you're going to get in a lot of trouble."

"Your dad?" Nino inquired, but Marinette shook her head, fear filling her eyes.

"Worse." She replied in a low voice, "My mother."

It was bizarre for Nino to stand by and watch, seeing mother and daughter argue and fight over Marinette's relationship with Nino.

He gathered, from watching them, that they were very close, but her mother did not approve of her sneaking off during the night, dressed in a silly costume and with a boy, out of all things.

"Don't I get a say in this dud- I mean, ma'am?" Nino interrupted and he closed his mouth at the look Marinette's mother flashed him.

"Your father thinks it's romantic, but I do not, Marinette. What if something happens to you?" Her mother's voice quivered and Nino reached for Marinette's hand and intertwined their fingers together.

"That's why she has me, ma'am." Nino puffed out his chest with confidence and Marinette's mother shook her head.

"You gods are all the same, thinking with your brute strength and not your head." Marinette's mom muttered, shaking her head, "If a single scratch is on my daughter, I'm warning you that no amount of godly powers is going to save you from my wrath."

"I assure you that won't happen." Nino reassured her and Marinette's mother disappeared into thin air.

"I'm so sorry about my mom. I'll understand if-"

"If what, Marinette? If I don't want to be with you?" Nino chuckled lightly and cupped her face with his other hand, "I've been wanting to be with you for so long now. I've been wanting to ask you if you'd like to be my girlfriend for a long time now."



“And if I said yes?”

She was so close to him, he could see the freckles she had splattered all over her face, like the stars were scattered across the night sky. “Then I’d be the happiest man alive.”

“Yes.”

---

Nino Lahiffe, God of Music and Melody, finally felt at home with other Gods and Goddesses. It was a strange feeling at first, but with Marinette, it was finally a welcome feeling.

He spent his days carefree and playing music that made everyone around him cry. He had finally stepped into his role fully, and he wandered the Earth with Marinette by his side, helping young musicians uncover the rawest parts of themselves to make music.

Everything was perfect and sitting with Marinette on top of the hill, watching the city below burst with life at night, the music calling his name, he sighed in relief.

“You look awfully happy.” Marinette kissed the top of his forehead and Nino’s smile stretched even wider.

“That’s because I am. Everything is finally settled into place and I’m not miserable anymore.” Nino hands her another flower to add to the crown she had been weaving him, kissing her fingertips when she reached for it.

“You never told me about your life before you were a God. You’ve mentioned it briefly to me during our strolls, but never quite the whole picture.”

Nino inhaled sharply, and sat up from Marinette’s lap. “Are you sure you want me to open that can of worms?”

“I want to know everything about you, Nino. All the good parts and bad parts. All parts of you, Nino Lahiffe.”

“It’s a long story but it begins like this...”

He tells her everything, his whole life and how it had built up to his almost death, before Apollo appeared before him, saving him and offering him a new life.

“And that old life ends like this. I met Alya and Adrien, who quickly befriended me and showed me the ropes, but I didn’t quite adjust to the life, until...I met you.”

He leans forward and tackles her into a hug, and they’re both laughing and shaking, tumbling down the hill, until they’re holding each other and pressing their foreheads against each other’s.

“Welcome home, Nino.”

Those words make his heart flutter and he feels it. He’s finally home, where he belongs and he’s crying tears of joy. He’s giggling and the people in the city below are dancing and playing to his heart’s tune. He’s *finally* home.



TikTok

@lahiffed

Hit or Miss! I guess  
they never **MISS**, huh?  
You got a boyfriend,

I bet he doesn't

**KISS** ya,

**Mwah!**



(lol)

(stoooooop)









# To Defend and Protect

-Joeneauxvieve-

*(AU: Kwamis chose their wielders, no identities known)*

Nino was shocked at first. A floating creature resembling a turtle, no larger than his palm, was telling him that magic existed, and so did superheroes. He was expected to be one.

Nino was only fifteen and found himself becoming more of a caretaker than an older brother to Chris. He didn't ask nor want to become a protector of Paris.

Yet, somehow, he was chosen to take on the role.

And kwamis are never wrong.

Nino asked the green kwami numerous times why he was chosen. In his mind, he was nowhere near cut out to be a hero. After all, what could a scrawny teen in his second year of Lycee do? Wayzz assured him that all his thoughts were far from the truth, but he still didn't believe it.

Nino relinquished ownership of the Miraculous but didn't let go of it just yet.

A sign over a small shop caught his eye the next day. The ornate, wordless design was identical to the one that decorated the smooth, hexagonal box that held the bracelet. The shop was vacant of any person but left the box on the low counter towards the back of the store.

He slipped out wordlessly and didn't see the shop owner take it back.

No less than a week later, the school year officially started. Paris had two heroes. Two heroes who were fit for the job. They got to the root of the problem and fixed everything. The monster of stone was no more. Paris, the school, and Ivan were safe again.

Unfortunately, Ivan was only the first.

More akumas came about. More innocent people were caught in the crossfire. Ladybug and Chat Noir with their combined efforts couldn't save everyone at once. When an akuma was going through Paris and destroying everything within its path, Nino only prayed it stayed far from his family and his home.

Hawkmoth grew more powerful. Nino's frustration after Gabriel refused to let him throw Adrien a birthday party became touched by the delicate, yet somehow indestructible wings of a cursed butterfly. It boiled into rage, and with it, he only tortured his friends and classmates by stripping them from their families. Through some warped filter, he interpreted it as giving them freedom.

Ladybug and Chat Noir saved him from the dark clutches of his thoughts, but when he realized what he did, he couldn't forgive himself.

He found someone who understood his pain, though. He certainly would have never guessed that he would have found her while locked inside a zoo enclosure. Neither chose to be there, but Ladybug placed them there so they'd be safe from the akuma that was nearby. The heroes would run into their



sights occasionally, always being pursued by a different animal each time. It was almost comical how the heroes dodged attacks and tried to free the cursed individual. Despite the smiles and giggles that slipped past their lips, it didn't make the atmosphere much easier for either of them.

The first thing Nino realized was that the giggles they both let out were forced. Neither of them found any part of their current situation amusing, even when putting another perspective in place of their own.

Nino knew the person he was in the cage with. Alya, although more people knew her as 'Marinette's best friend'. Similar to how he was only 'Adrien's friend' to many of his classmates.

Alya sat next to him, hugging her knees and unable to peel her eyes away from the battle. Very different from her usual attitude when close to any battles with the heroes of Paris.

He discovered, like himself, that she knew what it felt like to have one's anger amplified and behind the signature neon purple mask of a butterfly. In her experience, she nearly ripped off the masks that hid the faces of Paris' beloved heroes. She managed to broadcast her actions onto every screen in the city and took pride in stripping Ladybug of her identity. Tears welled in her eyes as she told him the story. Of course, she never remembered any of it herself. She was told and shown what had happened after Ladybug and Chat Noir freed her from Hawkmoth's strong grip.

She managed to hold the tears back until the end of her story. Her large glasses going lopsided as she pushed them out of the way to wipe her eyes. Nino couldn't help but cry with her. He asked for permission to hug her, and she gladly accepted. He told her his own story in return.

While being locked inside the animal cage was far from ideal, neither could bring themselves to have it any other way. A bond stronger than friendship blossomed between them. Nino received a kiss on his tear-stained cheek before it was safe to leave the cage.

-----

Chris clung to his brother's leg buried his face into the fabric of Nino's pants.

Small creatures had taken over the streets of Paris, all of them eating nearly everything in their path and multiplying with every bite. Everyone outside ran indoors for cover and Nino did the same. He scooped up Chris into the crook of his arm and ran home as fast as he could.

The door was shut and locked the moment both were inside. Their parents were still at their workplaces, so it was up to Nino to calm down his brother who was crying heavily.

Chris' chest heaved with the fear that filled him at the sight of the gremlins. Nino placed his brother on the sofa and spoke softly, reassuring him that everything would be alright. Chris nodded at the gentle words, reaching out for another hug. Nino removed the younger's glasses, preventing the bridge of Chris' nose to be hurt as he cried into Nino's shoulder.

In between gasps for breath, Chris asked for some water. A justifiable request.

Nino made his way to the kitchen and reached for the high shelf where the assortment of cups, mugs, and glasses stood. His hand landed on a smooth, angular object. It wasn't any sort of vessel for liquid, and it wasn't there earlier that day.

When he saw what it was, he nearly dropped it.



It was the same box he gave up well over a year ago. Memories flooded back to him from his and Wayzz's first conversation. When he was told he was chosen to be a defender. What he was meant to defend, was a question that remained unanswered. Regardless, Nino wasn't ready to be a hero then, and he still wasn't ready now.

He was compelled to open it to tell off the small green creature that inhabited it. Chris' shriek tore his attention away before he could do it. Nino quickly filled a water cup and ran into the other room to see what caused his brother to make such a sound. It didn't take Nino long to realize that he had forgotten to pull the curtains closed. Chris was still seeing the gremlins through the windows in the clear night.

It took time, but Chris was calm again and finally managed to get to sleep. As the soft click of the closing bedroom door reached his ears, Wayzz flew in front of Nino's face with a hexagonal wrist charm in his grasp. Nino listened intently to the kwami's instructions for using the magic jewel.

Nino agreed to take on the responsibility that came with it.

He's seventeen now, and it turns out he can do a lot with just his bare hands.

He took it and slipped it over his hand, slightly marveling at how well it molded to the shape of his arm. He climbed to the roof and took a deep breath.

*For the world*, he told himself. No, that wasn't quite right.

*For Paris...* still too broad.

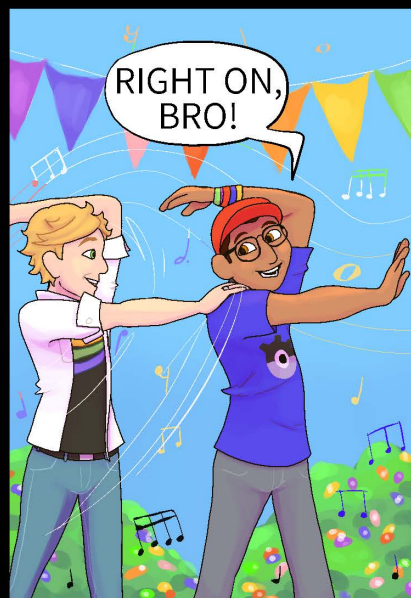
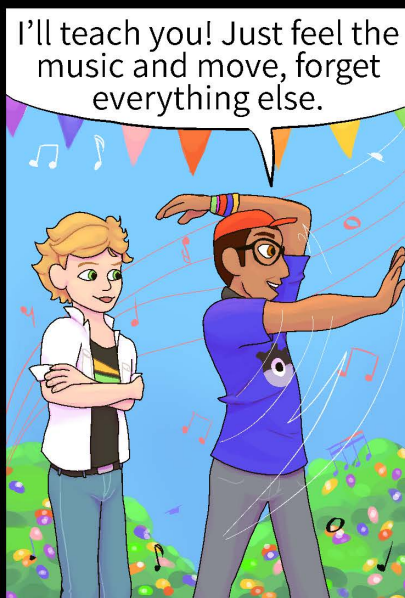
*For Chris.*

Yeah.

Nino drew in another breath.

"Shell on!"











# Worthy

-RadamaZard-

A heavy sigh joined the sounds of blaring traffic, its impatience mixing perfectly with the hectic melody that was rush hour in Paris.

Nino had been waiting, barely managing to contain his own excitement for what was to come. For *months* he'd been planning this, had been raving to anyone that would listen for even the slightest moment and now it was finally here.

Daft Punk, live in Paris, and he'd scored himself a VIP pass!

It sat proudly around his neck, and the glossy plastic bounced with him as he waited on jittery feet. To think, in less than three hours, he'd be watching his heroes right before his very eyes...

The mere thought of it had him vibrating with unrestrained joy, and if he weren't in public he probably would have lapsed into an embarrassing little... well, his mother liked to call it his 'excited dork jig'. Personally, Nino thought it was closer to a total cringe fest, but hey, to each their own.

A ridiculous grin split across his face as the light turned green and Nino dashed across the street. The station was in his sights, and he felt his heart beat in time with his steps as he drew closer. As fate would have it though, he never stepped foot in the station.

Right by the entrance he barreled towards, Nino caught sight of a short old man. If asked to describe him, he probably would have said he looked strikingly like Mr Miyagi from the Karate Kid movies, only with a louder sense of fashion. Yet that wasn't what drew his attention. No, that was the large box the elderly man was clearly struggling to carry.

For just a moment Nino considered ignoring him. After all, he'd been looking forward to this for months and saving up for the ticket hadn't been easy. But he couldn't just leave the old guy like that... Could he?

A pained groan hit his ears, setting his choice in stone.

"Hey, let me help you out, du- uh, sir," Nino offered, as he came up to the old man and took the box. A sharp '*omph!*' slipped past his lips at the unexpected weight. Man, how had the guy been carrying this?!

"A kind offer, young man. But were you not in a hurry? If you have someplace to be I can manage on my own," the elderly man replied with a kind smile. There was a twinkle in his eyes, a wordless promise that no ill will would be held. As tempting as that was though...

"Nah, it's chill. Can't leave a dude to struggle alone now, can I?"

The old man's smile only grew, as he gave a sagely little nod.



“Well then, I won’t refuse your kindness. Would you mind helping me get it home? I live only a few blocks from here,” He asked, and was delighted to see the brunet nodding, even as the boy shot the station one last wistful look.

“Lead the way, gramps!” Nino declared brightly. The box pressed tight to his chest, jamming the now useless pass between them. Yet he followed the stranger with a dutiful smile. Together they walked, Nino blind to the tiny turtle god who lay hidden in Fu’s pocket, beaming with pride.

---

The second time Nino met the old man, who he now knew as Mr. Fu, was when he was running stupidly late. Umbrella clutched tight and phone pressed to his ear, he ran, stumbling and careening wildly in the heavy Parisian rain.

“Frick Als, I swear, I had the alarms set and everything!” He cried out in defence, even as he could practically hear his girlfriend’s eyes roll. How she managed that through tone alone he’d never know. “I just- I got hella into the zone and you *know* what it’s like there! The world vanishes and freedom ain’t even an opinion until you’re violently eje-”

“I know, I know,” Alya cut him off, in a such a way that Nino knew he was forgiven. Thank fuck. “Trust me babe, I know. I’ve been there. I’ve missed more than my fair share of dat-”

A snort interrupted her, and a shudder ran down Nino’s spine as he swore he could feel her heated glare burning holes through his skull. Swiftly, he shut the heck up, knowing better than to say anything more.

“Share of dates. Just- the movie is starting, okay? Get here in ten mins or you’re losing your ticket to Marinette!”

He knew Alya was just playing around... mostly. It’d take a serious dick move for that to be a serious threat, and right now? His dick level was only puddle deep.

As luck would have it though, that was when Nino spotted one very drenched Wang Fu. There was a moment of silence as he watched the man, shirt dripping like a wet dog, hide under a small tree. He looked utterly defeated, defenceless in the sudden rainstorm that had hit only five minutes before.

There was no way he could just leave the guy like this! Not in such miserable weather, where he’d surely freeze his frail old ass off. Not so far from home, at least a half hour from here.

Empathy and hesitation fought it out for a long moment. On the one hand, Alya was waiting for him and he doubted Fu had even seen him. But on the other hand, it was such a dreary sight.

Firmly, and with a certain decisiveness, Nino sighed.

“Give it to Mari, Als. Have a good time with her, ‘kay? I’m not gonna make it in time,” Nino said quietly, as he approached the man and held the umbrella up between them. Warm brown eyes looked up, surprised, before a gentle familiarity settled in.

“Ah, Nino, was it? How good to see you again,” Fu said, with the genuineness of a doting grandfather visiting his grandchildren. “Such perfect timing too. I was starting to think I would be washed away with the storm!”



From across the phone line Alya sighed with a great warmth. "You just can't help yourself, huh?" she chuckled, her tender mirth intertwined with the quiet static of the rain. "You're lucky I love you, you doof."

"I love you too, babe. Sorry again, But I just can't- you know?"

"Yeah, I understand. Go be the hero I love, Captain Turtle."

A soft smile graced his lips as Alya hung up, and to his slight embarrassment, he caught Fu staring.

"You needn't give up your date for my sake," Fu urged, rather concerned for the teen he'd only met once before. "Please, don't let a foolish old man and a little rain ruin your day."

Despite the temptation, Nino only shook his head.

"Nah, it's chill. I'd feel guilty knowing you were out here, freezing your ass off and soaked to the bone. Where you heading? I'll walk you."

"Such kindness," Fu remarked, earning an awkward laugh from Nino and a shake of his head. "I was heading to the grocer, if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind, Mr Fu dude, just lead the way."

---

The third time Nino met the guardian was under less than desirable circumstances.

An akuma raged, Bomberina, and the citizens ran and scrambled for cover as she twirled. Each spin produced a small explosive, rendering all that were hit to piles of sparkling, holographic confetti.

Nino had been alone when the akuma had appeared, and he'd swiftly ducked into a nearby alley for cover. A nearby trash can lid had been snatched for defence and he clung to it for dear life. Man, if only he were Carapace right now...

But he wasn't, and thus he stayed the fuck from the raging battle.

Well he would have, if not for a horrifying sight that caught his eye. Several magic explosives were flying right towards a familiar Chinese man, elderly and seemingly frozen in shocked terror.

Near instantly Nino dove from his hiding place, making a mad dash for the soon to be casualty. Before him he held his flimsy, makeshift shield, and his grip held firm as he threw himself in front of Fu. On instinct alone his stance turned defensive, and he ground his heels in, preparing for impact.

Not seconds later, they came. Explosive after explosive hit his flimsy shield, yet he didn't falter. Not even as a particularly nasty one hit off centre, forcing his wrist back with a sickening snap. It was only once the akuma had stopped, courtesy of a furious Ladybug, that Nino finally let the highly dented disk clatter to the ground.

A sharp wince broke free from pursed lips, snapping Fu from his shocked daze.



"You're hurt," Fu uttered, with a heavy amount of guilt laden sorrow. Nino tried to wave it off, only to cry out harshly at the searing pain it caused.

"I'm f-fine," Nino swore, despite not feeling fine in the slightest. "Seriously, don't sweat it. I mean, what was I supposed to do, stand there and watch you get blown up?"

"It is what many would have done in your place," Fu stated. "Most would not risk themselves so fully, just to help another they barely know. Such kindness towards strangers is rare."

Silence hung between them, thick as the smoke that filled the air three blocks down, where the fight continued on. Not a word was said as Fu reached out to assess the damage to his saviour's wrist, and the quiet dragged on as Nino let him. Not a word was spoken as pair ended up at Fu's place, by the old man's silent insistence, or as Fu attended to Nino's broken wrist as best he knew how.

It was only as the miraculous cure spread over Paris, enveloping all and washing clean all damage and pain, that the weight between them was lifted.

---

"I don't think it's anything special," Nino admitted, minutes after the cure bathed him in its healing light. By now Fu vanished for a brief moment, returning with a full pot of his very best tea in thanks for the boy's heroic act. "I was just, ya know, helping. Like any decent person should. I mean, the world's already a shitty place. Why be a selfish ass and make it worse? Been there, done that. I wanna do something decent, be someone decent. And a little sacrifice is worth that, right?"

Fu listened intently as Nino spoke, with a certain pride welling within that caused the lad to chuckle sheepishly, as though embarrassed or sheepish.

"Uh, sorry. That was kinda corny, wasn't it? And rambly."

"Corny? No. *Genuine* is the word I would use. Genuine as you are," Fu affirmed, with an odd amount of decisiveness. "Genuine and kind, with a tendency towards selflessness. Along with a great empathy and loyalty, I would say that Wayzz was right about you."

There was a beat of silence and Fu took amusement at comical shock that crossed Nino's face.

"You- Wait, *what?*"

Wayzz zipped out from hiding, barely holding back a laugh as he watched his part time chosen's jaw drop.

"Are you saying what I think you are, master?" The kwami asked, and as Fu nodded he gave a little cheer.

"Yes. I believe you were right. It is time I entrust another with you, full time. I won't deny, I will miss you, old friend. But with the luck I have had," he paused, a twinkle sparkling in his eyes. "I believe it will not be long before our paths cross again."

Nino blinked slowly, staring at the incredulous scene of Wayzz, his kwami on loan, leaning his tiny forward against Fu's.



“Wait...” he said slowly. “What is- what’s going on?”

“Is it not obvious?” Fu teased with a chuckle, warm as the tea steeping between them. “It is time this old man learned to let go and trust a little more. So, Nino Lahiffe, I present to you, the turtle miraculous.”

Carefully, the miraculous was slid off his wrist and placed with great care within Nino’s outstretched palm. In dumbstruck wonder he took it and slid it on.

“Until the time that Hawkmoth is defeated, I would like for you to keep it. Please, take care of Wayzz,” Fu gently uttered, and watched fondly as the pair did a goofy little fist bump. “He is a dear friend of mine.”

“Don’t you worry, du- sir!” Nino exclaimed, with the most brilliant of grins. “I *won’t* let you down!”











WAYZZ,  
SHELL OFF!

